



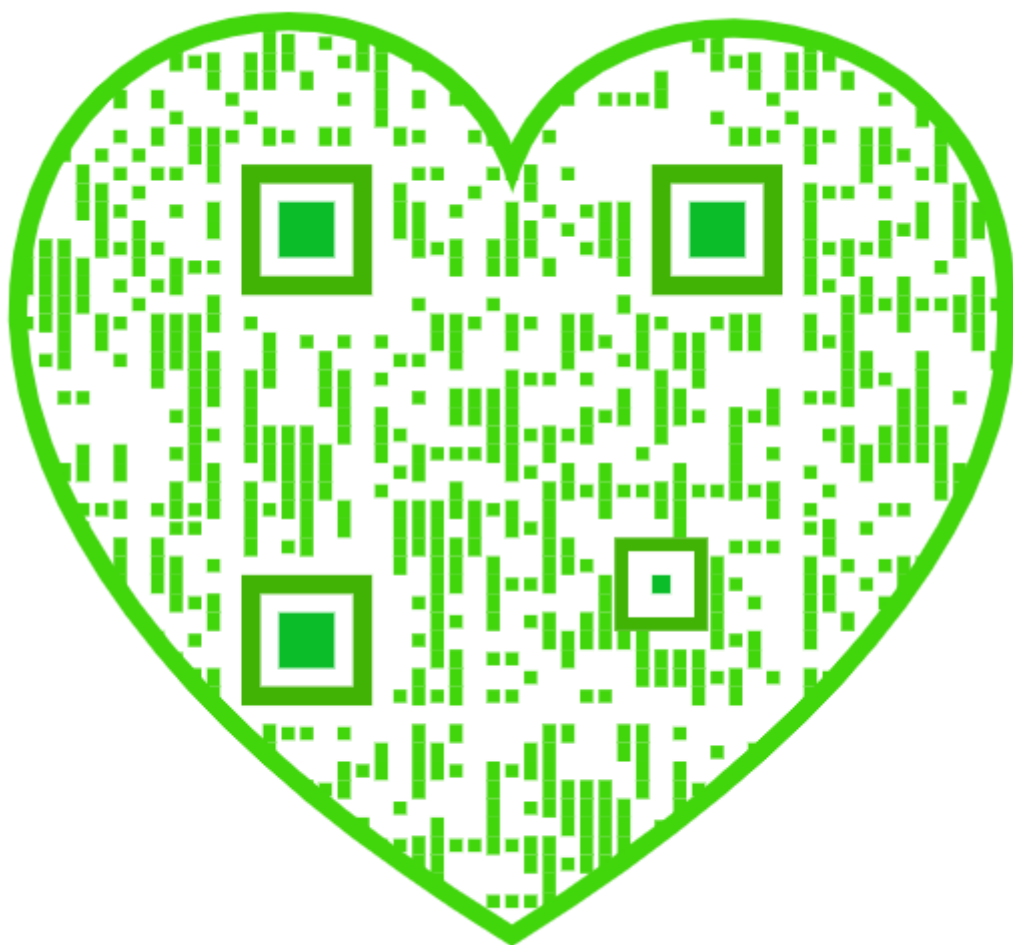
Yashiro-kun's Guide to

Author: Dojyomaru

Illustrator: Kou Kusaka

Yashiro-kun no
Ohitori
sama
kouza

Going Solo: After Story



A full-page illustration of a young woman with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes, sitting and reading a book. She is wearing a dark blue school blazer over a light pink shirt and a grey plaid skirt. Her legs are crossed at the ankles, and she is wearing white knee-high socks and black loafers. The book she is holding has a dark red cover with a small illustration of a cat on the spine. The background is white with several yellow stars scattered around. The title 'Yashiro-kun's Guide to' is at the top left, 'Going Solo:' is in the center, and 'After Story' is at the bottom center. The author and illustrator names are in black boxes on the right, and the Japanese title is in yellow text on the right.

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Prologue One: The Book Lover, No Longer a *Nuedori*

It was a peaceful, sunny afternoon. Outside the window, the water's surface glittered brilliantly. It was probably only about a hundred meters to the other side of the shore of what might have looked like a river, but was actually the sea.

I was in the city of cats and hills, Onomichi.

I inhaled the lush green of the mountains and the salty sea breeze as the scent wafted up the hill. Looking down from here, I could see the Seto Inland Sea that resembled a river, and the Nishi Seto Expressway connecting all the islands down to Shikoku.

I was inside a stylish little house halfway up a hill in Onomichi. It used to be a café, but now it was our home. I stood next to the study's printer, which was busily spitting out paper, and sipped on some café au lait while I gazed out at the view.

I never got sick of this view, no matter how often I saw it. Just like a Japanese garden with the perfect *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, or a huge tank in an aquarium. I understood why she wanted to live here so much.

Beep! Click, click...

The old printer stopped spitting out paper. It was finally done. I took the stack of papers and tapped them on the desk to line them all up, combined them with the other stack that I'd printed earlier, and fastened them together with a big binder clip. The paper was standard letter size, the bundle about three centimeters thick—about the size of a novel.

Just then, I heard the door open with a click.

"Phew! I'm finally done!" She walked into the room, moving her shoulders in circles. "Oooh, coffee. Is there more?"

"In the kitchen. Sure you don't want some tea instead?"

“Nah, I’m in the mood for coffee right now.” She plodded out of the room, then came back a few minutes later holding a cup of coffee with milk and sugar added to it. Her taste buds certainly hadn’t changed over the years; she still couldn’t drink the stuff if it wasn’t sweet.

“So how’s the book you’re editing this time?”

“That’s confidential,” she said, putting her finger over her lips with a giggle. She worked as an editor for a publishing company, proofreading and editing novels. It was a work from home position, but the publisher and authors had deep trust in her because she did such a thorough job.

I was pretty surprised when she told me she wanted to be an editor...

We’d been dating since high school, but back then I was almost certain she’d either shoot for being a writer or a librarian, yet she chose to be an editor instead. I recalled a conversation we had a while back.

“I like reading stories written by other people. You know, being immersed in someone else’s world. So even though I love reading books, I don’t really want to write them myself. If I became a librarian, I wouldn’t have much time to read. But if I become an editor, I’ll get the chance to experience stories the rest of the world hasn’t even seen yet.”

And it actually turned out to be the perfect career for her.

“Is that a new story?” She spotted the manuscript on my desk, a puzzled look on her face.

I laughed bashfully. “Not exactly. It’s a sequel to my last one. The first volume didn’t sell very well, but it did well critically because of its thought-provoking themes. The publisher gave me permission to write a sequel, so I tried my hand at it.”

“Oh? Can I read it?”

“Go ahead.” I handed the manuscript to her. She flipped through and read the first few pages. After a while, she gave me a puzzled look.

“This is such a strange format. It doesn’t feel like a direct continuation of the story because of how much time has passed.”

“Yeah, the prologue is set after the end of the whole story.”

“Why’d you decide to write it like that?”

“I wanted to make sure there was a satisfying conclusion, even if this ends up being the last volume,” I said with a laugh.

She gave me an exasperated look. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Sure it is. It’s not like this is some speculative novel where people have to avoid spoilers or something. I wanted to assure the readers that no matter how many laughs or tears came afterwards, everything would end all nice and peaceful.”

“Ha ha. I guess you’re right.” She smiled softly and set the manuscript back down on the desk, then settled into my chair to continue reading it. *Ohh, so now you wanna read the whole thing?*

I glanced at the clock. It was almost 4 p.m. “I need to go pick up Hibari and Takashi. I’ll be back soon.”

Our children, Hibari and Takashi, were at a daycare just down the hill, and it’d be time to go pick them up soon. She suddenly looked up at me. “Oh, that’s right. Thanks.”

“No problem. Need anything from the store while I’m out?”

“I don’t think so... Oh! What about alcohol? We’re all out.”

“Oh... Yeah, I’ll get some before they get here.”

Four of our friends from high school were coming to visit us next week.

“Heh heh. They’re gonna cross the Seto Inland Sea on their bikes, right? That takes guts,” she said with an amused laugh.

I shrugged. “They just really love biking.”

Two of our four friends were going to be riding their bicycles along the Nishi Seto Expressway that connected Imabari and Onomichi, using our house as a starting point.

First, they’d stay the night with us. The next morning, they’d borrow bikes at the Onomichi train station and bike all the way to Imabari, stay a night there,

hop on a ferry at the Imabari Harbor, and then return home to Mihara. I was actually going with them. It had been awhile since I'd gone on such a long ride, so I was looking forward to it.

"You're going sightseeing too?"

"Yeah, we're talking about taking the Kure Line."

The two friends who weren't coming on the cycling trip would stay behind here in Onomichi and have a girls' night. One of them was pregnant, so it was better for her to stay here while her husband went off cycling with me.

They would just take it easy and do some sightseeing along the Seto Inland Sea. They were planning on taking the kids and visiting Okunoshima, and the Nipponia Hotel in Takehara.

So we would be apart for a whole day.

"Ah, I see. Just like that one time."

"Yep. Exactly."

We both laughed. We were together now because of what happened back then, and thinking back on it always brought a warm feeling to my chest. In times like these, I wanted to call her by her old nickname.

"I'll be back in a bit, Nue," I said.

She looked surprised for a moment, but then a soft smile spread across her lips. "Be careful, Hachijo-kun."

Prologue Two: Our School Festival Together

Even though we were deep into autumn already, it still wasn't very cold outside. A week had passed since the commotion involving Sato-san. Our school, Ikanyama High, was having its school festival. We had to be there at 8 a.m. today for roll call, and then starting at 3:30 p.m. we would dismantle everything. Other than that, we were free for the day.

When our class or club didn't need us for something, we were free to look around at the other booths. We could even go home if we lived nearby.

I had the morning shift with Tsugumi Torano-san (also known as Nue) for the library committee's book café, so we had nothing else to do after finishing there. We decided to just relax together in our classroom.

Our class was serving Chinese rice in the courtyard, so students were either there or in the home ec classroom preparing the food. For the time being, our classroom was just a place for them to put their stuff. No one else was using it but us. They were trading off-hour shifts to make sure no one came and stole anything, but today it was just an empty classroom.

So it was just me and Nue...

"Hey, Nue. Can you grab volume six for me?"

Fwoosh.

"Thanks."

...and we were reading manga. Our desks were pushed together, and on top stood a mountain of more than thirty volumes of manga. I slurped on my carton of café au lait while I read the manga she handed me. She sat across from me smiling as she flipped through her book.

One late autumn day

She sat across from me there

Reading manga with a smile.

It was such a peaceful late autumn afternoon. Nue and I just sitting there reading manga in the corner of an empty classroom was my idea of heaven.

“What in the world are you doing in here?”

“Aha ha. As usual, Yashiro-kun’s just in his own little world!”

I snapped back to reality when I heard voices. I looked up to find Ido-san with an exasperated look on her face, and Hanamizawa-san smirking next to her.

“Hm? I thought you were down at the festival?”

“Both Kanon and I have been working since this morning, so they told us to take a break.”

“Yeah, we just came here to get our wallets. What are you guys doing?” Hanamizawa-san asked. I showed them what we were reading.

“Just reading manga.”

“Well yeah, we can see that!” Ido-san answered haughtily while Hanamizawa-san nodded emphatically by her side. “What I *meant* was, why are you cooped up in the classroom when a festival is right outside?! Shouldn’t you guys be walking around together down there? You know, like on a date?”

Hanamizawa-san put her hands on both of Nue’s shoulders, making her jump in her seat.

“?!?”

Ahh, she’s so cute. She’s so cute, but she hates being touched like that.

Ido-san jerked her thumb in the direction of the courtyard. “Even Yuzuki got up the courage to ask Yukito on a date! I bet they’re down there walking around right now.”

“Hm, sounds like they’re enjoying their youth,” I quipped.

“And you two don’t want to?”

“We did walk around a little bit. But Torano-san doesn’t like crowds.”

Nue nodded in response, so emphatically that she threw Hanamizawa-san off-balance. “Whoaaa!” she yelled.

I propped my elbow up on the desk and rested my chin on it, placing my other hand on the pile of manga. “I asked her how she wanted to spend our free time during the day, and we decided to read all the manga by this specific author. So I brought my big duffel bag full of manga today.”

“Which author is it? What manga are you reading?” Ido-san asked.

“*Roman Club*, *ARIA*, and *Amanchu!* by Kozue Amano.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of her.”

“I’ve read a couple, actually. They got turned into anime.” Hanamizawa-san started hopping up and down.

“Kozue Amano is known for her unique way of showing the fantasy, mystery, and beauty hidden in everyday life.”

“Huh?!” Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san said in unison, looking surprised at Nue.

“*ARIA* has stronger science-fiction themes with a dash of mystery, calling back to the style of Fujiko F. Fujio. It’s wonderful how she shows how you can find little miracles and fantastic things in mundane life. So I thought reading her manga would be perfect during the school festival. Here we are at school, looking at the same scenery we always do, yet today it seems like a whole different world, right? So these are a perfect fit.”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san stared at her silently.

“What’s wrong?” Nue looked confused as the two of them stood there, frozen. Finally they started functioning again.

“Oh, um... It’s just... Right, Chi-chan?”

“Y-Yeah. We were just startled, that’s all...”

Both of them lowered their heads in shame. *Ahh, that’s right...* This was the first time they’d ever heard Nue ramble like that. Once she got to talking about a subject she was passionate about, like books or her favorite stories, she became quite talkative. I was pretty surprised at first too.

I handed Hanamizawa-san a volume of manga. “I recommend *Amanchu!* volume six. And *Roman Club* volume two is pretty good too. Especially for the school festival.”

Hanamizawa-san blinked as she stared at the manga. “Huh? You mean I can read it? I wouldn’t be interrupting you two?”

“It’s not like we’re all alone, anyway.” I pointed to the boy sawing logs in the corner. He was supposed to be on watch so no one stole the personal items, but he’d fallen asleep from sheer boredom. If someone had stolen something and we hadn’t been here, he’d be in big trouble. I chuckled to myself. “Plus, I’m pretty confident that Torano-san and I can get lost in our own little world together even if there is someone el— Ouch!”

Nue kned the bottom of my desk. Her face was buried in a manga, but she was clearly embarrassed.

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san exchanged looks. “What should we do, Chichan?”

“Honestly, I’m pretty tired from working the booth.”

“Why don’t we relax in here till our next shift, then?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Can I borrow that sixth volume?”

“Sure. I think I’ll start *Roman Club* from the beginning.”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san sat down next to each other and started reading.

We could still hear the noises from the school festival drifting in through the window. Yet the four of us were gathered here in the corner of an empty classroom, reading manga. Outside, our classmates talked and laughed loudly, while we silently lost ourselves in the stories we read. If the guy who was snoozing in the corner happened to wake up, he’d probably be very confused by this scene.

This is a pretty nice way to spend the downtime during a school festival, though, I thought as I looked up, catching Nue’s eye. I saw a soft smile spread across her face.

Yeah. This was definitely my idea of heaven.

Chapter One: Closeness

At the end of summer vacation, it had still been too hot to really feel like the end of summer. But once November came around, there was definitely a chill in the air.

The Ikanyama High School festival had ended, and it was now midterm exam season. There was always a current of tension running through the air among the students this time of year.

Hanamizawa-san, who hated studying, could usually be found with a faraway look in her eyes, resting her face behind steeped hands propped up on her elbow, looking like Gendo Ikari. Meanwhile, Hadori-kun, who hated studying even more, was in a struggle with his textbooks.

Sato-san usually managed to score above average, so she was helping Hadori-kun study. Deep down, Ido-san was quite serious and hated to admit defeat, so she was silently plugging away at a study guide.

Nue was a star student who always scored within the top five of our grade. We exchanged notes and studied together, and I was on cruise control since I never really had to worry about my grades. Everyone else went through a range of emotions while we waited for our test results to come back, but I was just sitting in the back of the classroom reading in my seat, as usual. It was a break between classes.

“Hey, Yashiro-kun. There’s something I wanna ask you,” Hanamizawa-san said as she approached my desk.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this, but I know she won’t leave me alone until I respond.

I reluctantly closed my book and gave her a questioning look. “There’s nothing you can do about test scores once they get turned in.”

“I’ve given up on that already! It’s fine!” she exclaimed indignantly, hand on her hip.

Is it, though?

“Anyway, I wanna ask you something!”

“Hm? What?”

“I wanna know what Torano-san is like.”

Nue? I had a feeling my face was giving away my suspicion. “Why do you wanna know that?”

“Well, I haven’t really talked to her that much, so I don’t really know what she’s like.”

“Ooh, I’m curious about that too!”

“Me too!”

Ido-san and Sato-san belatedly came up to join in.

I let out a sigh. *What’s gotten into them now?*

“You know, she’s sitting right behind me.” *The cute girl sitting behind me with glossy black hair down to her shoulders? You know, my girlfriend?*

I had first asked her to go out with me right before summer vacation, so we’d been dating for about three months. Class had just ended, so I knew she was still sitting there.

A mischievous grin formed on Hanamizawa-san’s face. “No, no. I want to hear what *you* think about Torano-san.”

Wipe that smirk off your face, you little...

It was obvious she was trying to make me gush about my girlfriend just so she could see Nue’s reaction to it. Then she’d tell me how Nue reacted to get *my* reaction.

I was certain Nue had taken out her earbuds by now. I focused my attention behind me, but I didn’t hear anything. She was frozen, probably perked right up and ready to listen. She might have been brimming with curiosity. Of course I had no obligation to give into the girls’ whims, but... I wanted to see how shy I could make Nue. I’d go for it.

“Well, I think she’s adorable.”

“Ooooh!” The trio of girls said in unison.

“Torano-san tends to get lost in her own thoughts, so she doesn’t talk much. She acts all cool, but deep down she actually cares a lot. Sometimes she wishes she wasn’t so blunt, but that awkwardness of hers is really adorable. Her bangs are long, so when she leans over you can’t see the expression on her face. So sometimes when she looks up and she’s smiling softly, it makes my heart skip a beat. She can talk for hours about books, and I love seeing her so enthusiastic about something.”

“Huh? Um, Yashiro-kun?”

“And even though she can be cold sometimes, when she eats sweets, she gets this dreamy look on her face. I always wanna take a pic of her when she’s eating donuts, but every time I get my phone out her expression tenses up. So I’ve never gotten a good shot. It’s such a bummer...”

“Um, hello? Are you listening?”

“I love how she makes me feel so warm and comfortable. When we’re meeting up somewhere, that moment when she spots me and comes running over is just the cutest thing in the world. She’s not great at sports so she doesn’t run fast, but I can tell she’s running as fast as she can to get to me. And it’s soooo cute. Also...”

“Um, that’s...that’s enough, I think,” Hanamizawa-san awkwardly interrupted my rambling. Her face was flushed pink.

“I-I didn’t think he’d actually go on about her like that.”

“He must really love her. Hang in there, Torano-san!”

Ido-san and Sato-san both commented dryly.

“Um...you said all that knowing she’s right behind you, right?” Hanamizawa-san fanned her red cheeks.

Wasn’t that obvious?

“Yeah, I thought I’d use this opportunity to tell her how I felt.”

“Ooooh...” The chorus chimed in for a second time.

“Well? What’s her face look like right now?” I was about to turn around and see for myself when suddenly a hand reached out from behind and shoved against my head. Apparently she didn’t want me to look at her.

But it’s not gonna work, Nue. Your hand will slide right along my hair.

All I had to do was turn my head and I could easily look at her... *Wait, now she’s grabbing my cheekbone?! Oof, I definitely can’t turn around now...*

It must have been really bad if she was so desperate to stop me.

“Argh...”

The three girls were grinning while they watched our struggle.

“She’s as red as a boiled octopus.”

“She’s got tears in her eyes.”

“But she’s smiling. Apparently those are tears of happiness.”

Hanamizawa-san, Ido-san, and Sato-san each chimed in. Their comments only made the grip on my cheekbone tighten.

I wanted to see so badly, but I could tell Nue wouldn’t give in.

“In other words, she looks really adorable right now.” Hanamizawa-san winked at Nue.

I’ll just have to force the issue!

“Take that!” *Slip!*

I gave up on trying to turn around, and instead leaned over onto my desk. She wouldn’t be able to hold that tight grip on me in this position. The moment her hand slipped off of my head, I finally turned around.

And there she was, red-cheeked with tears in her eyes, glaring at me with all her might.



Has there ever been a more adorable creature in this whole world? I looked up towards the ceiling. My girlfriend was so cute it was physically painful.

And just then... “Argh!”

A book with a tiger embroidered onto the cover smacked right into my face. Apparently Nue had been so embarrassed that she whacked me with the book she was reading. Unable to bear it any longer, she ran out of the classroom.

“Jeez! What are you doing?”

“Yeah, don’t you think that was a bit insensitive?”

“You should probably apologize later.”

The three girls seemed exasperated with me. Meanwhile, I still had a book glued to my face.

“I’m pretty sure you started all this, Hanamizawa-san...”

“Oh. Yeah, well... Aha ha!” She brushed it off with a laugh. Ido-san and Sato-san joined in.

I peeled the book off my face and let out a sigh. Even the tiger on the cover seemed fed up with me.

◇◇◇

Honestly, Hachijo-kun...

After I finished eating my lunch, I went to the library and thought about what had happened earlier. It seemed like Hachijo-kun was running late.

Even though Hanamizawa-san had started it, it was obviously embarrassing to have him praise me like that in front of other people... I mean, it was really sweet, but still!

Hanamizawa-san and the other girls really enjoyed it too. Argh!

I felt like my world had expanded a bit ever since the incident before the school festival. Since Hanamizawa-san, Ido-san, Sato-san, and Hadori-kun had all been talking to Hachijo-kun, they’d started reaching out to me as well. They’d even wave when we made eye contact.

I wasn't great at talking to people in a group. If it was just one person, I could at least manage to say hello. But if they were with someone else, the best I could do was bow, and I felt bad about that. All four of them were great people, so it was easy for me to smile at them.

I never thought I'd gain so many acquaintances in such a short amount of time...

First, there was Kanon Hanamizawa-san. She was the popular girl who was friendly to everyone and a great communicator. She had soft and fluffy long hair and had a curvy, feminine figure. After Yashiro-kun gave her pointers on how to spend time alone, she began to enjoy doing things both in a group and by herself. Lately, she's been smiling a lot more than she had before. I was envious of her personality.

Next was Chikaze Ido-san. She was a pretty girl with short hair, but she could come off as stern sometimes. But I realized that was just her way of protecting her friends. She was physically fit and toned from playing sports. Honestly, I wished I could look like that.

Yukito Hadori-kun was the star member of the kendo club. He was a hot-blooded guy who cared deeply about his friends. He would always be there to lend a hand to a friend in trouble, but also just watch over them when he knew they could handle it themselves. I've heard rumors that he was really popular with girls, to the point where even upperclassmen were after him. He and Hachijo-kun were pretty much friends by now and talked often these days. Friendship between guys was so nice.

Then there was Yuzuki Sato-san. She was a transfer student who was a little shy. A pretty girl, and an introvert like me. But she'd been trying hard to change herself. I liked being an introvert, but I still thought her desire to change was really admirable.

"U-Um, Torano-san?"

Speaking of Sato-san, she was standing right in front of me. I had a bad habit of getting so absorbed in my thoughts that I couldn't see the world around me. Sometimes Hachijo-kun said he was worried about me when I didn't even notice someone coming into the library.

“Sato-san... What’s up?”

“Oh, um... I was just hoping we could talk,” she said. “Can I sit down next to you?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

She took a seat behind the desk, in the chair Hachijo-kun usually sat in. It felt strange seeing someone else sitting there.

Sato-san took a deep breath and then said, “U-Um... You and Yashiro-kun are dating, right?”

“Yes...” I replied after a short pause, nodding. I was silent because I was wondering why she was asking that, and how I should respond. Luckily, Hachijo-kun had told Sato-san and the others about my tendency to process things first before speaking. She didn’t seem to mind waiting patiently for me to answer.

“And... You like him, right?”

“Yes, I really like him.”

Once I had straightened out my thoughts, I was able to have a normal conversation. And yes... I liked Hachijo-kun. A lot.

“Well... I like Yukito-kun.”

“Yes, I know that.” I nodded.

Before, she’d been accosted by some bullies from her old school, and Hadori-kun, Hanamizawa-san, and Ido-san ran to her aid and helped her.

“He was like a prince who came to rescue you. I can see why you’d fall for him.”

“So you *were* there.”

“I don’t know what you mean...” I shook my head vaguely, though I was sure it was obvious at this point. Still, Hachijo-kun didn’t want anyone to know he’d been involved, so I had to do my best to keep it a secret.

Sato-san gave me an aggravated look and let out a sigh. “Whatever. Anyway, that’s why I wanted to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Who confessed their feelings first? You or Yashiro-kun?”

I paused. *Um, do I really have to answer that?* I thought that wasn’t the kind of thing you just went around telling people. Sato-san must have realized how I felt about this, because she put her hands together in front of her face.

“Please! I could really use the advice. All my friends are really great girls, but it turns out none of them have boyfriends. You’re the only one!”

It still seemed surreal to think that I had a boyfriend, and it honestly felt good to hear it out loud. I was so simple.

“Please tell me!”

“Hachi—er, Yashiro-kun confessed first,” I answered reluctantly. *Sorry, Hachijo-kun!*

She blinked at me. “So he told you he had feelings for you first?”

Oh, actually...

“Not exactly. I was the one who told him I liked him first.” I felt my cheeks getting hot. I was probably blushing.

“Huh? But you just said Yashiro-kun confessed first.”

“He was the one who asked me to be his girlfriend first. But I was the one who said I liked him first. Subtly.”

“Subtly?”

“We went to a karaoke place to study together, and I sang it to him.”

“I have several questions about what you just said, but I’ll hold off on those—can you give me some more details?!”

“I didn’t have the courage yet to come straight out and tell him, so I tried to say it through my song choices. I sang ‘I’m in Love with You Again’ and ‘I’ve Always Loved You,’” I told her, fidgeting.

She looked stunned for some reason. “You expressed your feelings through song...? That sounds like something out of the Heian era.”

“You’re not wrong.” I was fully aware just how roundabout and vague it was. After all, Hachijo-kun himself had no idea what I was doing at the time.

“Aha ha. Still, it’s kind of cool to secretly tell someone how you feel. Maybe I’ll do it next time we all go out to karaoke together...” Sato-san giggled.

I shook my head. “You probably shouldn’t. It’s honestly a double-edged sword.” *The kind that only hurts yourself.*

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“If you put your emotions into song, you’ll start thinking everyone else is doing it and reading too much into their own singing. That’s what happened when I was with Yashiro-kun too.”

“Ohh, I get it. What songs did he sing?”

“They were all over the place. He sang ‘Carrying You,’ and it made me so sad.”

“That song from *Castle in the Sky*? What’s sad about it?”

“That song’s about wanting to see your soulmate who isn’t with you right now. He sang that even though I was sitting right there.”

“Ohh, so you thought that meant he didn’t consider you his soulmate!”

“Yep. But at the same time, my heart raced when he sang ‘I Want to Live in This City With You.’”

“You have a really active imagination.”

Of course, Hachijo-kun probably didn’t mean anything when he sang those songs. But since I was in love with him, every single word he said or sang affected me.

Ahh, my face is burning up! There was no way I’d be able to cover it up now. I just wanted to go crawl into a hole somewhere.

Sato-san looked at me and giggled. “Yashiro-kun is absolutely evil for making you blush like that, Torano-san!”

And I had to agree.

“I’m going to go talk to Torano-san for a while, so can you give us some time alone?” Sato-san asked when lunch began. So I waited awhile before heading to the library.

Are they done yet? Well, first...

I stopped by the vending machine on the corner of the first floor to buy some drinks on my way to the library, but someone was already there. Hadori-kun had his back leaned up against the wall. His right hand was shoved into his pocket while he slurped on a carton of oolong tea. It was a casual gesture, but his good looks and physique made it strangely picturesque, like an old American movie poster or something.

“Did you come here to buy a drink too?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” He answered vaguely as I walked in front of him to the vending machine. I popped in two hundred yen for an unsweetened café au lait and a tea. Hadori-kun gave me a surprised look. “You’re buying two?”

“One’s for Torano-san.”

“Oh, right,” he replied, sucking down his oolong tea. Once it made the telltale rattling noise of an empty carton, he opened it up and flattened it, then put it in the trash. I was surprised that he was so meticulous. “You two are dating now, right?”

“Yeah. What about it?” I asked.

He crossed his arms and tipped his head to the side. “Well, a while ago when I went to the library, I saw you two sitting there at the circulation desk reading together. You didn’t say a single word to each other. Just sat there in silence. And then when I thought about it, I realized I’ve never seen you guys talk to each other in class either.”

“Oh, yeah. We’re always like that.”

All of a sudden Hadori-kun pointed at me. “That’s the thing! If you two are dating, you should talk more or be all lovey-dovey with each other! When you like someone, you want to talk to them even if you don’t have anything in particular to talk about, right?”

“Hmm. I think everyone’s different. We don’t really put that much emphasis on communication like that. But we do go to cafés and have fun chatting. We go out for tea to relax and talk with each other.”

“No, no. You need to talk on a more day-to-day basis. You just sit there in silence, not knowing what to do with each other.”

“I’m not really sure what to tell you...” We actually knew *exactly* what to do with each other, and neither of us minded it. From my perspective, it was nice not having to worry about constantly searching for a subject to talk about. Nue was exhausted by endless chatter too. Saving a conversation for when we went out together somewhere was perfect for us. “Don’t you think it’s special that you can be with someone and not have to talk?”

“I still don’t really get it, but I guess if it works for you guys, that’s fine,” he said with a grin. It wasn’t a patronizing smile either. He looked genuinely amused to find people with such different values. “Well, it’s none of my business, so I’ll stay out of it. Don’t wanna poke a sleeping bear.”

“Don’t you mean tiger?”

“Hm? Oh, because it’s *Torano-san*?”

No, it’s because she’s Nue. A yokai with the legs of a tiger. It was too much of a pain for me to explain that, so I decided to ignore it. “Well, I’d better get going. I don’t want to make her wait.”

“Gotcha. Tell the missus I said hey,” Hadori-kun teased, but I let it roll off my back.

“Yeah, yeah.”

After saying goodbye to Hadori-kun, I headed for the library. When I went inside, Nue was the only one there. She had already done most of the prep work for me, and was reading at the counter. I took a seat next to her and set down the tea I’d bought.

“Thanks,” she said after a pause.

That was enough to satisfy me, so I took out my own book and began reading, starting from the place I’d marked with the ribbon. It seemed like no one was

using the library today. It was so quiet we could clearly make out the conversations of students passing by in the hallway. The only other sound was that of us turning the pages of our book, her slight breath, and the occasional squeak of our chairs.

It wasn't anything special. We weren't sitting there having fun and chatting. But this space here with her was so comfortable. If I had to describe the feeling, it would be like crawling under the thick, warm covers on a chilly day with nothing to do and nowhere to go. You just wanted to stay there and never leave.

As we sat there quietly reading, I glanced over at Nue. She was completely absorbed in her book, as usual. From the outside looking in, we were just sitting here reading. We probably didn't look like a couple who were dating. Well, if that was all it took to look like a couple, then everyone sitting by someone in a library would look like they were dating. It's no wonder Hadori-kun didn't get it. But this made me ridiculously happy.

"What is it?" Nue met my gaze. I felt a slow smile spread across my lips as I shook my head.

"Mm, nothing."

"Okay. By the way, Sato-san was here earlier."

"I heard. Can I ask what you two were talking about?"

"Yeah. She wanted to talk about love, apparently. And ask for relationship advice."

"From you?" I said, thinking that was an odd choice on Sato-san's part.

Nue must've heard the surprise in my voice, because she pouted in response. "What, you don't think I was the right person for her to ask?"

"A-Ah ha ha..." I laughed it off vaguely, not wanting to confirm or deny.

She slammed her book closed and covered her mouth with it. "I...I have a lot of experience with love. Although you're the only example I can use," she said with a triumphant, yet slightly bashful look on her face.

Ugh, why is she so adorable? Hadori-kun, Nue and I might not talk that much

in the classroom, but this is how she is when we're alone together.

And it was my special privilege as her boyfriend to enjoy it.

Chapter Two: *Iza Kamakura*: Time to Go to Kamakura

Near the end of last week, we took our midterm exams following the school festival.

“Please choose your groups for the off-campus learning opportunity we have next week, and submit them by Monday,” our homeroom teacher, Furukawa-sensei, told us after we had finished the final test.

The off-campus learning opportunity was basically a field trip to the ancient capital of Kamakura. *This school sure has a lot of activities*, I thought as I absently listened to the teacher and stared down at the handout. According to this itinerary, we would meet up at the Kita-Kamakura Station for roll call at 9:30 a.m. After that, we could do whatever we liked, and had the option of a group trip to the beach. We would take roll again at 3:30 p.m. at the Katase-Enoshima Station and then disperse for the day, free to go sightseeing around Enoshima. We had to turn in a report later, but that didn’t mean we needed to stay with our group the entire time. We had to take pictures together at certain places, but otherwise we were free to do as we pleased.

It wasn’t like our school placed importance on students having freedom, but there was a backlash before with students saying, “Why do we have to go around in groups the whole time? Can’t we just go see the places we want with our friends?”

So as a result, we were more or less left to our own devices during free time. And it was up to us to find our own route to the Katase-Enoshima Station. We were encouraged to enjoy Kamakura however we pleased, so Nue and I discussed our plan for the trip.

We figured no one would go to the library right after a test, so we headed there and sat at the desk together. When we borrowed the key from the teacher in charge, they said, “Tests are over, you know. You can go home now.” But Nue and I liked it there, so we didn’t mind. I was happy just having her

reading next to me. It reminded me of the poem Nue told me about once:

*Being with a moonfaced maiden
even in the wilderness
would fill even a king with happiness.*

“Is something wrong?” she asked, making eye contact. I was hesitant to let her know I was thinking about something so deep, so I shook my head instead.

“No. I was just thinking about what we should do on next week’s field trip to Kamakura.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Oh? Someone sounds enthusiastic.”

“I love Kamakura. There are tons of shrines and temples.”

“Hmm...” I didn’t know that Nue was into shrines and temples. I guess we hadn’t really traveled much together but it made sense when I thought about it. “I can’t wait to see you clapping and praying in front of the offering box.”

“Is that your fetish?”

“Whoops. I shouldn’t have blurted it out!”

“So you *do* wanna see me do that!” Nue giggled. I was secretly relieved she wasn’t turned off. All of a sudden, she tilted her head to the side. “So...do you want to go to some temples together?”

“Yeah, I think that would be fun when we’re alone. It should be easy once we get to Kamakura.”

“Heh heh. True. Is there anything else you wanna do while we’re there, Hachijo-kun?” she asked.

I stroked my chin. “Hmm... Just visiting temples because we’re on a field trip sounds boring. As long as we can get back to the station on time, I think it would be fun to get some food and walk around, or maybe even go to an amusement park.” I stretched back in my chair. “It’ll be nice to get all that

exercise. I wish we could bring bikes, then we could ride all the way from Kita-Kamakura to Katase-Enoshima.”

“That sounds like a little bit too much freedom.”

“Yeah, I guess if we did that, Ido-san would try to come along. And then you wouldn’t want to join in.” Nue was more of an indoors person, so a trip requiring that much stamina would probably wear her out. I wanted to spend time with her, but I didn’t want to exhaust her.

“I don’t mind,” she said after a pause, with a soft smile. “As long as we make sure to set aside some time alone for just the two of us, I don’t care if we do group activities. Plus, there are a few places I’d like to go by myself too.”

“Oh, I see. I guess that’s an option as well.”

It seemed like it would be asking a lot of her to spend time alone, together, and with a group. Just then, she tugged on my sleeve. “Hachijo-kun?”

“Hm? What is it, Nue?”

“Still... I’ll get lonely if you leave me alone for *too* long.” She stared right at me, pulling me into her reddish-brown gaze. *Ugh, she’s so adorable. She’s seriously so pretty, though.*

“Of course. Let’s plan out our time together. We can decide where we’ll meet up, and where we’ll do solo activities.”

“Okay,” she said with a grin. Seeing her smile always made me feel warm inside. Suddenly, I remembered something.

Ah, that’s right. We have to form groups even though we’re only in them for roll call...

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“Hey, Yashiro. Do you and Torano-san wanna join our group?” Hadori-kun asked in class the next morning. “It’s me, Kanon, Chikaze, and Yuzuki. You guys haven’t joined anyone else’s group yet, right?”

“No, because we’re...” I pretended to be hesitant.

He shrugged and gave me a smirk. “Yeah, I know. You two wanna be all

alone.”

“Yeah...”

“Don’t worry. Our group is planning on doing solo activities.”

“You are?”

“Yep. Seems like both Kanon and Chikaze wanna do something alone, so we’re just gonna meet up somewhere. Yuzuki and I might just join up with someone else’s group.”

It sounded like they all had the same kind of idea. Hadori-kun pulled up a map of Kamakura on his phone and set it down on the desk.

“We were planning on going to at least two temples or shrines together first. We could go to Engaku-ji since it’s close to Kita-Kamakura Station, and we could take a pic there. Then we’d hit up Hase-dera near the giant Buddha statue, and take the last pic there.”

“Oh, that’s a good schedule.” Having the first and last stops so far apart was a nice idea. That would let us all plan our own schedules in between. The Katase-Enoshima Station was our last stop, and Hase was way over on that side, so this was the perfect schedule for individual activities.

“So anyway, that’s our plan. What do you guys think?” Hadori-kun looked across to Nue, then chuckled as he turned back to me. “Your wife says she wants to leave it up to you.”

“I have to make the decision?” Nue would still get a little stressed when talking to multiple people at once. I really wanted to know what her face looked like, but I bet if I turned around she’d run away again. “Fine. We can be in your group.”

“Great. I’ll go write down your names on the sheet and turn it in,” Hadori-kun replied.

It certainly had been a timely offer, but should we have taken it?

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Since I sat right behind Hachijo-kun, I overheard him talking with Hadori-kun. So I knew that we were joining his group for the field trip. I didn’t have any

complaints about *that*, but...

“Heh heh heh...”

I *did* have a problem with the way Hanamizawa-san was snickering right in front of me. First period had just ended, and we were on a break. She was sitting in Hachijo-kun’s vacant seat with both elbows propped up on my desk, grinning at me.

And no matter how long I waited, she didn’t say a word to me. I had a feeling she was waiting for me to speak first.

“What?” I finally asked.

She gave me a satisfied smile. “You’re going to be in our group on the Kamakura trip, right?”

“Yes...? It seems that way.”

“Ahhh, I’m so happy we’re going to be together!”

You are? Why? “I thought Hachi—I mean, Yashiro-kun was the one you’re friends with.”

“Ha ha ha. Friends? I’m not confident enough to call us that. But he’s a good guy, and he always gives good advice. Although sometimes he can be a little harsh,” she said with a dry smile.

And yet you still keep trying to talk to him... You’re like the queen of communication.

“But I do want to be friends with you, Torano-san.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you’re just like Yashiro-kun; you have a really strong sense of self. I’ve realized how important that is ever since I learned how to enjoy spending time alone. So I thought maybe you could give me some pointers on that too.”

I didn’t know how to respond. I spent the majority of my time alone because I wasn’t great at conversation, not because I wanted it to be that way. I was just so *used* to being alone that I never felt like joining a group. All I needed was Hachijo-kun by my side; I was satisfied with that.

She suddenly threw her pleading hands in front of my face. “*Please?! I promise I won’t interrupt you two. Just...if you feel like it...do you think you could talk to me sometimes?*”

“You already *did* interrupt us,” I sighed.

“Huh?”

“Before the school festival. In the classroom after school.”

“Oh! Th-That time...” Her eyes darted around anxiously.

I was talking about the time before the school festival, when I wore the *cheongsam* for Hachijo-kun.

“*Hachijo-kun...*”

“*Nue?*”

I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing my face close to his.

I might be a nuedori crying in the shadows, but this was how I felt deep in my heart.

I had tried my best to express the emotions overflowing within me. Glancing over Hachijo-kun’s shoulder, I’d seen Hanamizawa-san, Ido-san, and Sato-san standing in the doorway even though I’d thought they left. They were making hand gestures as if to say, “Oh, don’t mind us! Go on!” As if I could just ignore them.

But I had already wrapped my arms around his neck, and his eyes were wide. I knew he had no idea they were behind him. So I mustered up my courage and...

Smooch.

I kissed him on the cheek. I certainly couldn’t go for his *mouth* in front of others. That was the best I could do, but even that was still embarrassing. Once I pulled away, Hachijo-kun turned bright red and touched the spot where I’d kissed him. Then after a few moments, he said, “Nue... I had no idea you were so bold.”

And then he smirked at me, that idiot.

I was suffering from another case of embarrassment just remembering it, but all of a sudden Hanamizawa-san brought me back to reality by smacking her hands together again.

“I-I’m so sorry I interrupted your first kiss!”

Honestly... But... “It’s fine. I’d already...”

“Hm?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head vigorously. The truth was, I’d kissed him on the corner of his lips that day he fell asleep behind the school building. But there was no way I’d tell her such a mortifying thing. I’d rather die.

“Are you hiding something?”

I tried to remain silent.

“You *are* hiding something! Hey! Hey!” Hanamizawa-san started poking my cheeks, but I would *not* talk. I clamped my mouth shut until she finally gave up.

“Whatever. Anyway, I meant it when I said I want to be your friend.”

“Really?”

“Yep. So I hope we can get together in Kamakura and hang out, even for a little while!” she said with a shy smile.

She really does want to hang out with me... She reminded me of how Hachijo-kun acted during the first semester. Even though she was the complete opposite of him, maybe inside they were similar somehow? In that case, maybe I could be friends with her?

It would be exhausting to always try to match her outgoing and cheerful pace, but if we just chatted every now and then... Maybe I would be comfortable spending time with her like that.

As I pondered this, she gave me a soft smile. “I’m really excited for Kamakura.”

“Yeah...” That was the best answer I could give right now.



That night, I was in my room packing for the Kamakura field trip the following

day. According to our handout, we had to wear either our school uniform or a sweatshirt with our school crest on it. Other than that, we didn't have to wear our school shoes or bring our bags with us. We could just wear comfortable shoes that were easy to walk around in, and bring whatever bags we wanted as long as they didn't get in the way.

I decided to take a backpack with my things in it. *I'll wear my uniform tomorrow. Let's see, what else...* I went to my dresser and took out a bra and a pair of panties. Just then...

"Hm? Sis, I thought you said tomorrow's trip was only for one day."

When did that little weasel sneak into my room? I spun around to find Tsubame sitting on my bed. Tsubame Torano was my little sister, and a first-year junior high school student.

Since my father was an avid birdwatcher, he wanted to name my little sister something that went with my name. He settled on *tsubame*, or "swallow." Although my first and last name had a negative connotation when you put them together, my sister's sounded like a tiger swallowtail butterfly. My father was quite clumsy for striking out in both attempts to name his daughters after birds.

Although my name was a pillow word that referred to a *nuedori* crying in the shadows out of loneliness or lost love, my little sister was a very sociable and bright girl, worthy of having a name like a butterfly.

Thanks to Hachijo-kun, I no longer had a complex about my name, but sometimes I did wonder if someone's name really did reflect who they were on the inside.

"Tsubame. How many times have I told you to knock first?"

"Who cares? Your adorable little sister just wants to hang out!" Tsubame's big, friendly eyes sparkled as she spoke. "Anyway, sis. Even if I *did* knock, you wouldn't have noticed because you were totally spacing out!"

Even so... "Anyway, what do you want?"

"Mom says dinner's almost ready. But since you looked like you were having so much fun, I just thought I'd watch for a while."

“How long have you been standing there?”

She was so lacking in tact sometimes that I had to wonder if she was *really* my sister.

Tsubame came up behind me and wrapped her arms around me. “Sooo? Tell me... Why do you need to pack an extra pair of undies when you’re coming back the same day?”



“There’s just somewhere I want to go.”

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of spending the night with your *boyfriend* on a *school field trip*?!” Tsubame pretended to be aghast, dramatically covering her mouth.

To be clear, I hadn’t said a word to her about having a boyfriend. But she seemed to notice a change in me before summer break and guessed that I was dating someone. She was way too sharp.

“Speaking of Kamakura, there’s a ton of hot date spots there. Shonan, Enoshima, they’re all places to have a summer romance! You can go to an observation point and gaze at the stars while he makes a toast to your beautiful eyes,” Tsubame said as she poked my cheek.

I wasn’t even sure where to start with that one.

“First of all, it’s not summer. Second of all, we’re going to be wearing our school uniforms so we wouldn’t get away with staying out late enough to see any stars. Third of all, apparently the god enshrined in Enoshima is very jealous, so any couples who go there will break up.”

“What decade are you *living* in, sis? You probably read that in one of your books.”

Well, that’s true, but still!

After that, Tsubame decided to shove her cell phone (which my parents only recently bought for her) in my face. “See? If you search for ‘Kamakura dates’ all this stuff pops up! Plus, I’m sure the gods would be happy for you to enjoy a date on their turf. Just drop a few coins in their offering box!”

“That makes them sound pretty greedy...”

She was right, though. There *were* a lot of results when you searched for date ideas in Kamakura. Maybe Hachijo-kun and I could go to one of those spots and continue where we left off that day in the classroom? *Heh heh heh.*

I felt my cheeks flush as I imagined us looking out over some beautiful view together. But of course, Tsubame was staring at me the whole time.

“Wow. Love really changes people. I never would’ve imagined you’d be like

this someday, sis.”

“You’re only in junior high, Tsubame. How do you even know about all this stuff? You’re too precocious.” I flicked her lightly on the forehead.

“Ow! What’s ‘precocious’ mean?” She rubbed her head and stuck out her tongue at me.

“Look it up.”

“Grr... Hey, wait! You didn’t deny what I said about being in love!”

“I wonder what mom made for dinner.”

“Ah! Don’t change the subject! Tell me!”

I tried to leave the room, but Tsubame entangled herself around me. I wondered if I would have to introduce her to Hachijo-kun one day.

For now...I would keep it a secret.

Chapter Three: With Everyone, on Their Own

The day of our field trip had finally arrived, to a perfect blue autumn sky. We only had to switch lines once from the nearest station to our high school—hopping from the Shonan-Shinjuku Line—to our meeting spot at the Kita-Kamakura Station. It was surprisingly accessible, which was also probably why the train was packed with morning commuters.

“You okay, Nue?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Nue and I met up at the station and then headed to Kita-Kamakura together. The train was even more crowded than usual with the addition of us students. Nue was so small, I was afraid she would get crushed. I nudged her towards a corner between the door and the seats, and stood behind her so she wouldn’t get smashed. The top of her head was right below my chin. If not for the hectic atmosphere, the scent of her hair might’ve made me dizzy.

“I wonder what she was thinking about when she got crushed on a packed train without even a word?” she suddenly murmured.

“Are you talking about the Japanese test?”

I thought she was probably referring to a problem that was on our Japanese midterm exam the other day. There wasn’t a whole lot of explanation so I wasn’t sure whether it was from a book or an essay, but there was a passage about a young girl who got crushed on a packed train in chaotic post-war Japan.

After the test, Nue complained to me that just reading the passage about it had made her feel sick. There was one thing I was certain of, though.

“I don’t really want to hear about that right now.”

“Ha ha.” She gave me a soft chuckle. *Fine, I’ll forgive you.*

I worried the entire train ride that she would get crushed, but finally a bunch of people got off at Shinjuku Station. By the time we passed Yokohama Station,

most of the remaining passengers were just other students from our school. Nue and I moved apart and were able to comfortably face each other.

She was wearing her school uniform, complete with the blazer, and had brought a backpack. I had chosen to wear the sweatshirt with our school crest on it that we usually wore for gym class, and had brought my usual backpack.

“It finally calmed down,” Nue said, bringing me back to reality.

“Hm? Ah, yeah.”

We’d just passed Totsuka, and there weren’t many people left on the train. “I’m glad you didn’t get crushed like the girl on our test.”

“Yeah.” Nue smiled softly at me. A thoughtful look came over her face. “You know, a crowded train makes me think of another story.”

“Oh?”

“Mm-hmm. Can you turn around, Hachijo-kun?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure what she was up to, but I did as she said. Suddenly, I felt something rest against my back. It was firm but warm. Was that...Nue’s back? I turned my face around to look, and sure enough, her back was against mine. She wasn’t leaning against it. She just had it pressed up against me.

“Um, Nue? What are you trying to do?”

“There’s a scene like this in that story,” I heard her say from behind me. *Ahh, this is making me feel ticklish.* ““Together with the jostling of the passengers pushing them in the crowded train, they felt something else moving about their shoulders—some kind of lively force. They thought it might be wings. There was a hint that the hidden folded wings were holding their breath,”” Nue recited in a soft, almost lyrical voice. “Two students, a boy and a girl, who are both cousins and lovers, are standing back-to-back on a crowded train. They noticed the feeling of each other’s backs was warm and ticklish, almost like the other had grown wings.”

“Ahh. Yeah, I can see that.” It felt pretty strange to stand here like this with her. I didn’t think this should get me as flustered as if we were face-to-face, but feeling her shoulder blades against me was making me feel strangely sensitive. I

tried to push those thoughts out of my head. “That sounds pretty romantic. I might wanna read that if it’s at the library.”

“It is, but if you’re looking for romance, you’ll be disappointed.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s by Yukio Mishima. It’s called ‘*Wings*.’”

“Okay. Figured as much.” If it was by Mishima, that meant that some kind of tragedy would befall either one or both of them. Still, I was morbidly curious. Since it was at the library, I’d have to look for it next time we were there.

Just then, I heard Nue giggle. “His descriptions here and there are wonderful, though. It has a psychological depiction that reminds me of something from a shojo manga. I just always wanted to try this at least once.” I felt more pressure on my back as she leaned against it. That was enough to make my heart skip a beat.

“Well? Did my back satisfy you?”

“That’s a weird way to put it. Well, I don’t know if I felt the wings.”

“Ah.”

“But... You really are a boy, huh? Your back feels so big.” There was a hint of shyness in her voice.

I’d give anything to see the look on her face right now. I wanted to turn around, but at the same time, I didn’t want this to end. Meanwhile, the train finally arrived at Kita-Kamakura Station.

“Unusual to have a railroad crossing inside a station like this.”

“Yeah. Sometimes they have them on the Enoshima Electric Railway, though.”

We chatted as we descended down the platform to the railroad crossing.

“Iikanyama High students! Please exit through here and check in with your homeroom teacher by Engaku-ji. Don’t stand around on the platform waiting for your friends or you’ll just get in the way of other people!” A teacher from the school stood on one side of the crossing and called out to the students. The Kita-Kamakura Station platform was pretty small, so it was better to wait

outside instead of crowding up here.

Nue and I left the platform, then met our homeroom teacher who had the attendance sheet. Hadori-kun and Sato-san were already there.

“Hey, there you are.”

“Good morning, Yashiro-kun.”

They were both wearing our school uniform blazers. I was a bit surprised that Hadori-kun didn't choose to wear a sweatshirt, since he was such an athlete. Just then, Sato-san tottered over and peeked behind my back. “Morning, Torano-san,” she said with a big smile.

Nue bowed silently. It seemed she was still a bit uncomfortable in conversations with more than one or two people around, so I was trying to melt into the background. I laughed and greeted the other two. “Morning. You two are here early.”

Hadori-kun and Sato-san exchanged smiles. “Yeah! I love field trips, so I wanted to come early.”

“I do too. I was so excited to come, I wanted to make sure I wasn't late.”

That definitely tracked. “So? Where's Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san? They're not here yet?”

“Oh, they just texted saying they'll be here soon.”

“Actually, there they are right now!” Sato-san pointed to the two jogging over to us. Hanamizawa-san wore our uniform blazer and was carrying a bag like Nue's, and Ido-san wore a sweatshirt and had her backpack slung over her shoulder. Apparently they had taken the train after us.

“Ah! See, I *told* you we would be the last ones here!”

“I said I was sorry, Chi-chan!” Their banter continued as they drew closer.

“Morning. Have you been waiting for us long? Kanon was taking *forever*!”

“Aha ha... Sorry, it took me longer to get ready than I thought.”

“Heh heh. No worries,” Sato-san said with a smile.

I heard Nue mutter from behind me, “What is this, ‘Nobita and the Animal

Planet’?” and I had to stifle laughter. Now that I thought about it, Hanamizawa-san *did* sound like Gian when she apologized for taking so long to get ready.

Ido-san’s gaze turned towards us. “Yashiro and...Torano-san? Wow. Morning.”

“Oh, uh. Morning.”

Nue bowed silently.

“You’re wearing a sweatshirt, huh? Well, guess I am too.”

“I was planning on getting some exercise on the trip.”

“Really? But Torano-san is wearing her uniform.”

“Yeah. We planned everything out beforehand.”

“Hmm...” Ido-san glanced over at Hadori-kun. “I’m surprised you’re wearing your uniform, Yukito. I totally thought you’d show up in your sweatshirt.”

Hadori-kun gave a somewhat bashful nod. “Yeah, well... We’re all gonna go off on our own, so I was planning on spending some time with Yuzuki. We might go and join someone else’s group for a while.”

“And this is all right with you, Yuzu-chan?” Hanamizawa-san wrapped her arms around Sato-san and poked her cheek. “You sure you didn’t wanna spend time *alone* with him today?”

Even though she wasn’t asking Hadori-kun directly, he could clearly still hear her. I wondered how he would respond, but he left it up to Sato-san to answer.

“Yes. I know Yukito-kun has more fun when he’s in a big group, so I want to enjoy that too,” she said. *Wow, she’s really getting strong.* It was hard to believe she was still the same scared girl who was surrounded by bullies from her old school.

Sato-san covered her mouth and then whispered, “But if I get a chance to be alone with him...I’m going to take it.”

“Ooooh, get it, Yuzu-chan!” Hanamizawa-san was so impressed by Sato-san’s enthusiasm, she stopped teasing her.

Sato-san was not just stronger, but bolder as well. It was a bit scary how much

girls could change. Just then, Nue gave me a swift elbow in the ribs. I could feel her glaring at me. It seemed like she was trying to say, “You shouldn’t eavesdrop on girl talk!”

Hadori-kun, ever oblivious to these things, clapped his hands. “All right, time to take the pic to give us our alibi!”

“Alibi... Don’t you think there’s a better way to describe it?” Ido-san asked, looking annoyed.

We were required to take photos with our groups in front of two temples on this field trip as proof that we had been there. In a way, it *was* sort of like an alibi.

“I’m not sure if we’re allowed to take pictures inside, so let’s just do it now!” Hanamizawa-san said, and asked a student nearby who was holding a camera to take our photo. Their armband indicated they were with the photography club, so they must’ve been tasked with taking photos for the yearbook or something. “Excuse me! Will you take our photo, please?”

“Sure thing.”

We all lined up in front of the stairs leading up to Engaku-ji so that the girl could take our picture.

“Do you two want to be in the middle, Yashiro-kun and Torano-san?”

“Nah, Torano-san would probably prefer to be on the edge.”

She nodded silently.

“Yeah, but doesn’t it make a better picture if a girl’s in the middle?”

“Then have Yuzuki be in the middle.”

“What?! Me?!”

After some discussion, we rearranged our formation with Hadori-kun, Ido-san, Sato-san, Hanamizawa-san, me, and Nue from left to right.

Click!

“Okay! Looks good.”

“Thank you!” we all said.

With our alibi taken care of, we climbed the stairs and entered the temple.

“I’m not really sure what we’re supposed to *do* at the shrines and temples here, though. It’s not like it’s New Year’s Day where we can just make an offering and leave, right?” Hanamizawa-san said, looking at her ticket after we paid the admission fee.

“Yeah, I don’t know much about the history here.”

“What’s so interesting about this place that makes tourists wanna come here?”

Hadori-kun and Ido-san agreed. Sounded like the typical opinions of young people. I guess I was young too, but still...

“I’m pretty interested in all the spiritual stuff,” Sato-san said as she read through the pamphlet they gave us. “It says here that the temple was founded by a Chinese monk at the request of Hojo Tokimune after he repelled the Mongolian invasion, to honor those who died on both sides of the war.”

“Oh yeah, the Mongolian invasion. That’s really famous. There’s games about it and stuff,” Hadori-kun said.

Hanamizawa-san gave him a puzzled look. “Hm? It’s famous?”

“Yeah, we learned about it in social studies. This is, like, junior high level stuff.”

Ahh, that’s right. She doesn’t like studying.

All of a sudden, Hanamizawa-san clapped her hands together. “Ohh, is this about the divine wind that supposedly sank the Mongol’s ships?”

“No, that was supposedly an exaggeration about the power of Buddhism. What actually happened was that the Kamakura shogunate was able to gather information to build defenses and prepare for the invasion. At the time, the warriors fought to the death like berserkers, rampaging so wildly that it lowered the morale of the Yuan-dynasty Chinese-Mongolian military,” I corrected.

Ido-san smirked at me. “Of course Mr. Smartypants knows the answer.”

“I just like reading books about the Sengoku era, that’s all.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Hadori-kun crossed his arms and nodded. He was the kendo club’s ace after all, so I could see how he might be interested in that era as well. “Still, it’s hard to find temples all that interesting...”

I heard a whisper from behind me. *Hm?*

““There are lots of ways to enjoy temples,”” I relayed back to the group. Four pairs of eyes stared at me.

“Yashiro-kun?”

“Yashiro?”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san both stared at me. I ignored them and continued. ““Some people like to enjoy the architecture and some are interested in the Buddhist statues. There are some who come to enjoy the gardens. Even during the rainy season, you can come to a temple and look at the pretty hydrangeas.””

“Um... Why are you giving this passionate lecture about temples all of a sudden?” Hanamizawa-san asked.

I pointed behind me. “No, that’s what the temple-loving girl behind me just said.”

I turned and saw Nue standing there with her eyes downcast and cheeks flushed.

“Ohh, so you were interpreting!” Hanamizawa-san said in a dramatic tone of voice.

Oh, Nue was talking again. “Um... Oh. ‘If you’re interested in the Sengoku era, you might like the legend about how the temple would be protected should invaders attack. Mountain temples were often the sites of sieges, and some castles were built on their remains. Conversely, some castles were later turned into temples.’”

“Hey, that is pretty interesting. And?” Well, she’d gotten Hadori-kun’s attention.

““In the back of Engaku-ji, there’s a long, gently sloping pathway. The protectors of the temple were at an advantage from being so much higher up

than the attackers.’”

“Oh, yeah?”

“‘Also, there are many smaller buildings and walls here. There are three pathways leading from the gate, but if you blocked the middle *sanmon*, you could split up the enemy.’”

“Ah, I see. Like a tower defense game. That sounds fun.”

“Yeah. It’s so exciting when the enemy gets all bottlenecked like that!”

Ido-san, the shonen manga fan, joined in with Hadori-kun’s enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Hanamizawa-san and Sato-san looked clueless.

“Huh? Why are you two so excited?”

“I guess Yukito-kun is a boy after all...”

“Then what does that make Chi-chan?”

“Boyish, I guess?” Sato-san said with uncertainty. She probably meant tomboyish.

“‘In particular, the key point of defense is the hill behind Shorein.’”

“Shorein?” Hanamizawa-san repeated. *Hm, hm.*

“It’s just over there. It’ll be easier to show you than to explain, she says.”

We passed by the other students who were heading for the temple proper, and followed Nue to a building surrounded by a white wall next to the *sanmon*. Placards hanging from the building said “Shorein” and “Wildflowers and Tea Flowers.” Next to the entrance was an offering box that said “Please pay one hundred yen per person to enter.”

“Ohh, so that’s why they gave us our change in hundred-yen coins when we paid the admission fee.”

“Yeah, so we didn’t have to go back for change.”

Ido-san and Sato-san were chatting as they put in their coins. After we all paid the entry fee, we followed the narrow path to the left. It led to the building’s garden.

“When we walk in a line like this it makes me feel like we’re going through a dungeon in an RPG,” Hadori-kun said.

“I get that,” I agreed. This pathway did kind of feel like a dungeon, because it followed the white wall and gradually led up towards the mountain. It was like exploring the outside of a castle in an RPG. After that, we came to a path that ran along a cliff.

“Hm? Whoa!” Hanamizawa-san at the head of the line suddenly started making a fuss when she turned around.

As we turned around as well, we were greeted by a bird’s-eye view of the area around the *sanmon* below. We saw the thick-tiled roofs of the gate and the temple, the crimson-leafed trees growing all around, and the stone wall built around Shorein, with the path snaking around it. Colorful red flowers dotted the hillside.

“This is an amazing view. I had no idea this was here.”

“All our other classmates are walking right past it. It’s a shame they won’t see it.”

Both Sato-san and Hanamizawa-san gasped in awe, and I couldn’t help but feel the same way. As a dragonfly zoomed past, I thought about how this view here of the temple, the mountains, and the city below perfectly showcased Kita-Kamakura’s charms. Meanwhile...

“You can really see everyone down below so clearly. If we had a ballista up here, we could blow the attacking enemies away.”

“If you knew they were going past, wouldn’t it be better to use something automatic and fixed?”

“Yeah, I guess. That way you could focus on the obstructions in the path.”

Hadori-kun and Ido-san began discussing their tower defense strategies. *They’re still going on about that? Oh, well. At least they’re having fun,* I thought as I turned to glance at Nue. She was kneeling down by a little shed. She picked up something and then put a coin in a box next to it. I walked away from the other four, who were still busy enjoying the view, and joined her.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“I bought some incense,” she said, showing me a bundle of incense. Apparently she had no problem talking normally when it was just the two of us. She placed the incense in a burner, and lit it.

“Incense... Do you know someone who’s buried here or something?”

“No. The view is just so pretty. I knew I wanted to come here. You know how there’s a graveyard? Well, there’s a family buried here—they were involved in a famous incident and died. I’d been thinking I wanted to offer them incense if we got to come here.”

I saw a sign nearby with writing on it. The incident happened before we were born, but I’d heard about it. “I’ll offer some too.” I suddenly felt very sad, and decided to buy some incense and burn it along with Nue. We walked to the grave together and put the incense there, then knelt down to pray. We could hear the happy voices of our classmates clamoring in the distance, but otherwise it was very quiet here. Suddenly, I realized Hanamizawa-san and the others were behind us, praying as well.

“It’s pretty here... But there’s more to it than that, right?” she said once we’d finished praying. “That’s how it is with old temples. A lot of people’s emotions are floating around here. I wonder if that’s part of what draws people here.”

I wondered the same thing. I had a feeling that was why Nue wanted to come here.

Afterwards, we looked around inside the temple and walked around the gardens. We all had our own opinions of it, but I thought the view of Shorein that Nue had shown us was still the most impactful for us all.

Inside the building, there was a huge dragon painted on the ceiling. All of a sudden, Hadori-kun smacked his hands together loudly.

“What is it, Yukito-kun?” Sato-san asked.

He tipped his head to the side. “Isn’t the dragon supposed to shake if you make a loud noise?”

“That’s the Nikko Roaring Dragon...” Sato-san said, exasperated.

“Oh, is it?” Hadori-kun burst out laughing.

I gave him a side-eye and was just about to leave the building when...

“Seriously though, look at that dragon!”

I overheard a group of three male students chatting as they looked up at the dragon on the ceiling.

“I wonder how they came up with that stuff back in the day. Like kappa and creatures like that.”

“True. It looks all mixed up.”

I understood what they meant.

One of the guys pointed. “It’s got the head of a camel, the eyes of a rabbit, ears of a cow, antlers like a male deer, neck of a snake, stomach of an eel, feet like a tiger, talons like an eagle, and the 107 scales covering its body are all koi, right?”

“How’d you know all that, Kazuya?”

The kid called Kazuya shrugged.

“Because all *you* do is put together Gundam models on the weekends, Tatsuya. Kazuya actually reads,” another boy piped up.

“Oh, please. Don’t act like you don’t do the same thing!”

“No, I do. Ha ha ha!”

The three of them burst out laughing. I knew that guy—he was Souma-kun. Sometimes he dropped by the library to borrow books. Not many students did that nowadays, so it was easy to remember him. His name was on his school library card.

Souma-kun put his hand on his hip and looked up at the dragon. “Wish I could see something like this in real life even once. I wonder what that would feel like.”

“It’d feel like seeing a dinosaur! You’d have no other choice but to run away screaming or fall down on the spot, right?”

“Probably.”

I shot one last glance at the three boys and then left the building.

“All right. Now I guess we can go do our own thing, huh?” Hadori-kun said as we reached the bottom of the stairs at Engaku-ji. It was a little past 10 a.m.

“Yuzuki and I were planning on walking over to Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu. What about you, Kanon and Chikaze?”

“We’re gonna wait for the next train and go to Kamakura Station,” Ido-san said.

“I’ve already been to Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu, on a field trip in elementary school and on a family vacation. I’ll pass on it this time. It would be a detour from Kamakura Station, anyway,” Hanamizawa-san said. Then she looked at me. “What about you two? Gonna walk there or take a train?”

“Oh, we’re gonna walk. But there’s somewhere Torano-san wants to go first.”

“Really? Where do you want to go, Torano-san?”

“Yep, tell them.”

“Huh?!”

Until then, Nue had been like a ghost behind my back, but I stepped aside to put her in front, encouraging her to speak for herself. Before, she’d said she didn’t like it when I always told her that, but I knew that these four would be patient with her. And they were; all four of them were quietly waiting for her to speak.

Nue seemed a bit panicked, but then calmed down. “Um... I want to go to Tokei-ji.”

“Tokei-ji?” they all repeated.

“Wait, isn’t that...” Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san had surprised looks on their faces.

Meanwhile, Sato-san looked confused as she glanced back and forth between me and Nue. She must have known what the temple was about.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like that,” I told her with a laugh. “Nu—er, Torano-san just wants to see a musical performance there. It’s like going on a pilgrimage.”

“O-Oh... I was worried.” Ido-san let out a relieved sigh. It was nice of her to be so concerned about us.

Hadori-kun clapped his hands together. “All right. If there’s no other problems, then we’ll go our separate ways now. Don’t forget, we’re meeting up again at Hasedera at 2 p.m.”

“Okay!”

“I know.”

“That’s right.”

“Roger that!”

Silent nod.

All of us gave our responses, and then we set off.

Chapter Four Part A: A Trip through Kamakura (Kanon's POV)

It was a little past 10 a.m., near Kita-Kamakura Station.

"Guess they all left, huh?"

"Yep. Time for us to go too."

After Chi-chan and I said goodbye to the other four, we went back to Kita-Kamakura Station and stood on the platform to wait for our train. The sky was big and blue, and the weather was great. The sunbeams felt so warm.

"You know how Yashiro-kun and Torano-san were going somewhere else?"

"Yeah. Something, something temple?"

"Since they wanted to go alone, I wonder if it's a popular date spot or something? Like a temple for lovers or whatever?" I asked, looking at Chi-chan. In my opinion, I thought that she really had a crush on Yashiro-kun. It had been a while since we found out the shocking truth that he already had a girlfriend, so I was curious what she thought about him lately. That's why I was fishing around for info.

She shrugged. "I dunno, Yuzuki had a really skeptical look on her face. I wonder what kind of place it is."

"Yeah..."

Hmm. Not much of a reaction there.

"Well, knowing those two, whatever kind of place it is, I'm sure they'll just make their own little world anyway. Sometimes they're so into each other it's like they don't even realize other people are around."

"I guess. But are *you* okay with that, Kanon?"

"Huh? Why wouldn't I be?" I didn't understand what Chi-chan meant.

"Well, because you got so attached to Yashiro, calling him Master and

everything. I just figured you were super shocked when you found out he had a girlfriend.”

Hmm, were we actually thinking the same thing again?

I crossed my arms and thought about it.

“Well, he’s more of, like, a psychological master when it comes to spending time alone. That hasn’t changed. I’m definitely still planning on asking his advice for things.”

“He is surprisingly caring, isn’t he?”

“Right? I’m a bit envious of Torano-san, to be honest with you.”

“Oh?” Chi-chan gave me a surprised look.

“Well, Yashiro-kun knows exactly what he likes, you know? He doesn’t care what others think of him, and he’s satisfied just enjoying what he does. I bet it feels amazing to have someone like him think you’re special,” I confessed.

“Hm... Yeah, I can understand that.” Chi-chan nodded. “Even though he didn’t know us, he was so friendly to us. Like a big brother or something. If I found someone like him, who would just give all that love to me...”

“Right? I can’t even imagine it. Do you really think Torano-san can handle all of that?” I said. I had a feeling that Yashiro-kun was *really* intense when it came to love. If he had to choose between loving one woman or saving the world like in some anime, he’d definitely choose Torano-san. But...

“I think so. She kinda strikes me as the same type.”

“I guess so. After all, she was the one who confessed her feelings first.” I thought back to the other day when Chi-chan and Yuzu-chan asked Torano-san if she loved Yashiro-kun, and she told us that she did. I could still clearly picture the look on her face; her cheeks were flushed and she had a faint smile. She really seemed crazy about him, and I knew that he was crazy about her too. There was no way anyone would be able to get in the middle of those two.

“I feel like Torano-san might like him more lately, though. She seems to have a really strong idea of what she likes. I’ve been thinking that I really want to be her friend.”

“Ohh, so that’s why you’ve been talking to her so much lately.”

“I feel like I’m just bothering her, though. Still, she’s so cute. Like a shy little kitten.” She reminded me of a little animal who wasn’t used to being around people. I remembered a cartoon movie I saw when I was little where the princess said, “Oh, you have nothing to be afraid of!” to a little animal who tried to bite her. “One of these days we’re gonna become BFFs and I’m gonna take a selfie with her.”

“Good luck with that,” Chi-chan said, rolling her eyes.

So what? I’d always loved people. And thanks to Yashiro-kun, I’d learned how to enjoy time by myself too. But that didn’t change the fact that I loved getting to know others. *Wait, why are we talking about me here?!* I felt like I’d just very skillfully been given the shaft. A strange feeling swirled inside of me as we climbed onto our train.

We got off the train at Kamakura Station and came out onto Komachi Street. This was the place to go if you wanted to eat delicious food in Kamakura, after all!

“Excuse me! I’d like a black currant and blueberry cheesecake, please!” I cheerfully put in my order at a famous bakery we’d easily found.

The employee came out and bowed in apology. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have those ready yet. Right now we just have sweet bean paste, cream, or matcha flavors.”

This place was known for interesting items like ham and cheesecake, keema curry, and even shirasu German fried potatoes. But apparently we’d arrived too early, before those specialty items had been prepared. *Ugh*. It seemed like we were getting off to a pretty rough start already.

“Okay... I’ll just have the sweet bean paste.”

“Thank you for your patronage!”

After buying a thick fried pancake stuffed with bean paste, I headed over to Chi-chan, who looked exasperated. “Kanon, didn’t you just eat a meatball kebab?”

“How can you come to Kamakura and not try Hayama beef? The beef sushi looked good too, but it was a little expensive, so I went with the kebab. It was sooo yummy.”

“And now you’re eating a stuffed pancake?”

“I had something salty, so now I want something sweet.” I’d call today’s trip the Kamakura Food Tour. My plan was to walk around by myself and eat lots of delicious food without worrying about who was watching me. I’d been saving up for this trip, so I wanted to make the most out of it.

After I finished eating the pancake, some other food caught my eye. “And now that I just ate something sweet, I want something salty again...”

“Huh?”

“Excuse me! I’d like a Kamakura kamaboko!”

“You’re eating again?!”

I ignored Chi-chan’s shock and dismay, and went over to the food stall. I bought a Kamakura kamaboko with corn inside. The white stick-shaped kamaboko was dotted with yellow corn and had a chopstick skewering it. I took a big bite out of it. *Munch, munch.* Mmm. Meat is good, but seafood is delicious too.

Chi-chan gave me a sidelong glance and let out a sigh. “I’m surprised you don’t get fat eating all that. Too fat, I mean.”

“Um, excuse me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Because you’re the perfect amount of curvy and it looks so cute on you. It pisses me off that you never go over that line.”

What?! “Hey, stop poking my stomach!” Chi-chan started pinching my sides and my upper arms. *It’s not like I eat like this year-round, you know!* I liked to treat myself when I went out to eat, but normally I didn’t have a big appetite, so surely it was fine...right? “Knock it off already!”

Chi-chan put her hands on her hips and sighed yet again. “Why don’t you just exercise after you eat? How about we go for a walk?”

“Aren’t you going to Zeniarai Benten next?”

“Yep. Then I’m gonna hike over to the giant Buddha.”

“Wow. That takes a lot of dedication.” *Munch.*

“And you don’t seem to have any! The gods are going to get angry at you, you know.”

“Ha ha. Not even the gods can stop my appetite!” I shouted, raising my kamaboko high in the air. All of a sudden...

Flap, flap!

“What?! Huh?!”

“Kanon?!”

I heard a whooshing noise rush past my ear. Confused, I looked up and saw that my kamaboko was gone. I turned around and saw a large bird flying away, flapping its wings. It was a black kite. A black kite had snatched away my food.

“Nooo! My kamabokoooo!”

“Wow, it really swiped that thing from you.” Chi-chan looked up at the sky, shielding her eyes with her hand. “I think someone at the first food stall was talking about this happening.”

“Argh! I only got one bite!” *That darn bird! How dare it steal my kamaboko! Face the wrath of my anger!*

“Um, Kanon. That’s not a good face for a girl to be making.”

“The best way to make me angry is to steal my food!”

“You’re terrifying. Stop looking at me.” Chi-chan recoiled and turned her face, her shoulders trembling.

“Hey. Are you laughing?!”

“I-I can’t help it! I’ve heard of people having their fried chicken stolen, but...pfft...a kamaboko?! That’s like something out of a manga or something! Pfft...”

“Stop stifling your laughter and just laugh out loud already!”

“Bwa ha ha!”

“Honestly! Just c’mon, Chi-chan.”

“Ha ha ha! Wait! I’m sorry, Kanon!”

When we’d finally calmed down, the two of us took a side street from Komachi Street and walked towards the railroad crossing. We crossed over it and stopped. Kamakura Station was on the left.

“Okay, I’m gonna go to the station now, Chi-chan.”

“All right. I’m headed towards the mountains.”

Chi-chan and I were going our separate ways.

“We’re going to meet up at Hasedera next, right? You’re taking a mountain road, aren’t you? Be careful.”

“You too, Kanon. Although the only thing you have to be careful of is eating too much...”

“That’s rude. I have other plans *besides* eating, you know!”

“Yeah, yeah. See ya.”

“Yep. Bye.”

She lifted up her hand for a high five. *Smack!*

“Later!” we both said.

Once I was alone, I began walking the path along the railroad tracks. The sky was blue and the sunshine was warm. There was a gentle, refreshing breeze. I passed by a group of students from a different school, who were peering into the windows of a little shop selling who knows what. I wondered if they were all friends. Little side street hole-in-the-wall shops like these tended to have good food. That was one of the great parts of Kamakura.

Yep. Going well so far.

Yashiro-kun had taught me a lot about enjoying time alone, and I thought I’d finally gotten the hang of it. Before, when I was alone and saw a group of people, I would feel anxious and unsettled. But now I didn’t really feel like that. Even when I saw people enjoying themselves in a group, I still had fun by myself.

Maybe that's because of what happened with Yuzu-chan. When Yuzu-chan was in trouble, we all came together to help her. We were all in separate places too. Chi-chan and I were still at school and Yukito-kun was at club practice. Yashiro-kun was the one who brought us all together behind the scenes. Torano-san helped too, even though we had never spoken. I just felt this, like, unbreakable bond between us all. I knew that even if we went our separate ways, we'd all come back together again. That was why I could be comfortable being alone.

Also, it's so much easier not having to worry about other people.

I went inside a bakery along the railroad tracks. When I'd searched for "Kamakura sweets," a picture of a maritozzo stuffed full of whipped cream and strawberries popped up. It looked so delicious, I knew I wanted to eat it once I got to Kamakura. If Chi-chan were here, she'd say "You're eating *again*?!" But that black kite *had* stolen most of my kamaboko, so this was to make up for that.

I bent over and peered into the display window, looking at all the delicious sweets lined up in a row. But unfortunately, there were no maritozzi. They were probably a limited-edition seasonal item. Instead, there were a bunch of chestnut desserts, like mont blancs.

Ugh, that sucks. Oh well. I still like chestnuts.

It would be hard to walk around while eating a mont blanc, though. I could eat inside the bakery, but I didn't have time for that. It felt like a waste to choose something else when they had chestnut stuff, though. *What should I get... Oh!*

I found something on a small table behind me. There was a cute woven basket, filled with bite-size chestnut pies wrapped in plastic. Those would be perfect to carry with me, but most importantly, they looked delicious.

"Excuse me. I'd like three chestnut pies." I immediately bought them without hesitation. They fit perfectly inside my school uniform's pocket, so I didn't need a bag. I left the bakery with a smile on my face, and started to unwrap one.

"Ah!" I stopped, and scanned my surroundings and the sky. *All right. No black kites in sight.*

There was no way I was going to let any more of my precious food get stolen. It was a rather strange vow to make, but nevertheless I greedily ripped open the package and bit into it. The subtle sweetness of the chestnuts and the flavor of butter spread throughout my mouth. There was sweet bean paste inside too, which went surprisingly well with the butter.

Mm, this is such a guilty flavor. I was sure if Chi-chan were here she would start ranting about diets and sugar, but I just couldn't resist the siren call of sweets. I was already unwrapping the second one. And since I was all alone, I didn't have to worry about anyone watching me.

"Walk, walk! Because I'm young! Go, go, go west!" I hummed an original song I made up (that part's important) and practically skipped down the road. There were so many food temptations in Kamakura, even on side roads like this. Every time I saw one, I couldn't decide whether or not I should try it.

If I eat too much now, I won't have room for lunch... But it all looks so good...

If I was with someone else, they'd tell me to hurry up, but since I was alone I had plenty of time to think about it and come to my own decision. I fought against the temptation and bought a matcha milk (drinks were fine, right?) before I finally arrived at Kamakura Station.

I bought a ticket at the Enoden platform—which was by a different entrance than JR—and entered. I could head to Hasedera Station where everyone was meeting up, but there was somewhere else I wanted to go first.

I stood on the platform waiting for the train as I shoved the last chestnut pie into my mouth. Suddenly, someone slid in next to me.

"Huh? M-mm-mmph?"

It was Tsugumi Torano-san. I quickly chewed and swallowed. *Gulp.* "Torano-san? What are you doing here? Isn't Yashiro-kun with you?"

She didn't answer. *Um, is she ignoring me?* Oh, right. She was the type of person who had to think a lot about what she'd say. Yashiro-kun had told us that even though she might not answer right away, she eventually would if we gave her enough time.

Ding, ding, dong. Ding, ding, dong.

“We’re both going our own separate ways right now,” she said.

“Are you?”

“Yes, there was something I wanted to do. Hachi—er, Yashiro-kun had things he wanted to do too. And we have plans to do things together as well. We decided to save that for last.”

“Oh, okay. So this way you’ll get to do everything you both wanted!” I thought maybe since they were dating that they’d want to do everything together, but I guess they could do separate activities too. Those two were really interesting. “Same for me and Chi-chan. We’re gonna do solo activities for a while.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Chi-chan’s going to trim bushes up in the mountain, and I’m going to do my laundry in the ocean.”

“Your clothes will get all sticky from the salt water.”

I totally meant it as a joke and she immediately went along with it! Seemed like Yashiro-kun was right—give her enough time and she could actually hold a conversation. That made me kinda happy.

“Wanna know where I’m going? Well? Do ya?”

“Not really...”

Oops, guess I came on too strong. She turned her face away from me. Hrm... Getting close to her is tough. How in the world did Yashiro-kun capture her heart?

I jokingly sidled up to her. “Oh, come on. Stop giving Yashiro-kun all your attention and get interested in me too!”

“I’m not comfortable being this close to you.”

“Wow, you just came out and said it. Do you hate me now?”

“No. I’m saying it so I don’t *start* hating you.”

Hrm. So then she could like me? It seemed like if I was too anxious to get close to her, it would have the opposite effect. But one of my special talents was reading the room, so I scooted away from her. “I’ll be careful, then. I don’t want

you to hate me.”

“I’d appreciate that...”

“Is this distance okay for us to talk?”

“Yes, it’s fine.” She gave me a little smile. She was so cute. No wonder Yashiro-kun was crazy over her.

Just then, a retro-looking train pulled in. It was an Enoden train that resembled a streetcar. Our school was close to Oji, so I was used to seeing the Sakura Tram, which was the metropolitan tram.

After all the passengers got off on the other side, the door in front of us opened. Torano-san and I boarded as quickly as possible.

And the station we got off at was the same too.

After we left Kamakura Station, we passed Hase Station—which was close to our meeting point of Hasedera—and got off two stations down at Inamuragasaki Station. That was my destination for today.

“You’re getting off here too, Torano-san? Does that mean...”

“You too, Hanamizawa-san?”

We both looked at each other in surprise. I realized that Torano-san *was* carrying a rather large bag today, just like me. And if we had the same things inside...then we must’ve had the same idea.

“Looks like we’re gonna be together for a while, huh?”

“Aha ha...” She laughed, but her expression didn’t change much.

I gotta tell Chi-chan about this little miracle. I quickly texted her and said, “I’m with Torano-san rn”

We left the station and crossed the railroad tracks towards the beach. Before long, we could hear the sound of the waves amidst the roar of the distant highway. Even though it was November, it was warm today. Despite the salty sea breeze, I was beginning to sweat.

We walked along the road that followed the beach and...

“There it is! The hot springs!”

There was a large parking lot and a building that looked like it was a restaurant, but the sign definitely said “Natural Hot Springs.”

“Ever since Yashiro-kun took me to that spa, I’ve been obsessed with going around to all the local hot springs. So I thought being able to experience one on a field trip would be amazing too!”

She didn’t respond. *Whoops. Maybe I shouldn’t talk about that.* Yashiro-kun and I didn’t do anything bad, but if I were his girlfriend, I wouldn’t be very happy about him going to a hot spring with another girl. In fact...I’d be pissed.

“Nothing happened between us! We just took a bath. Ah, I mean, not together! Separately! I practically forced him to! Um...” *Argh, it just sounds like a bunch of excuses!* What if this negatively impacted their relationship?! Although it might be kind of thrilling to be called a homewrecker at least once.

Torano-san let out a sigh, her shoulders dropping. “I know that. Yashiro-kun explained everything to me,” she said. *Wait, he did?* “I’m the one who bought the ticket you used, you know.”

“Really?! I’m so sorry about that!”

“Yashiro-kun paid me back for it, so don’t worry about it.”

Ohh, it sounded like Yashiro-kun had asked her permission in the first place. Good, now I didn’t have to be a homewrecker. Wait...

“So you mean you knew what your boyfriend was doing and you *let him*?”

“I suppose.”

“Don’t you think that’s being a bit too generous?”

“No. It made me feel uncomfortable.” She knotted her fingers together. “But he was trying to be kind, and I didn’t want to get in the way of that. That kindness has saved me many times. So...I just pushed aside my own feelings and encouraged him to do it.” She smiled softly at me. I had a feeling she was picturing Yashiro-kun right now.

Argh! How much cuter can one girl be?! And if I felt that way about her, I could only imagine how Yashiro-kun felt. He was one lucky guy! And before I said I was jealous of Torano-san because she had a boyfriend like him...

“I’m so jealous of Yashiro-kun right now.”

“Huh? Of Yashiro-kun?”

She gave me a puzzled look. I reached down and took her hand. “I want to be friends with you, Torano-san! I mean, I’ve been thinking that for a while, but now I’m *sure* of it! I wanna be just as close to you as I am to Chi-chan and Yuzu-chan!”

“Like I said, it makes me uncomfortable when you’re this close...”

“All right! Now that that’s decided, let’s hang out naked! That’ll make us even closer!”

“Wh-When was it decided? And don’t yell something misleading like that so loudly...”

“Time for the hot springs!” I dragged Torano-san off to the building. Although one of my special talents was knowing how to read the room, my other special talent was just choosing not to.

The building had two floors. The first floor had some kind of Hawaiian-themed restaurant (or maybe West Coast American?) where you could see the blue panorama of the Sagami Bay out the windows. I guess they really wanted to attract surfers.

We went in through the front door and stood in front of the ticket machine.

“Hm, there are a lot of options. How about the ‘second floor bath with a view’?”

“They have this too,” Torano-san said, pointing to “Bath with a view plus meal.” You could choose between steak or seafood. Oooh, that was tempting.

“Well, since we’re here, we might as well eat lunch.”

“Yeah! That’s a great idea!”

We both chose the second option and bought our tickets. I doubted that Torano-san would eat as much as me, and she would probably be freaked out once she heard how many calories I had consumed today, but who cared?

We handed our tickets to the young lady at the counter near the shoe lockers. She told us that all we had to do was present our meal tickets at the restaurant

after our bath. Then she asked whether we would like steak or seafood.

“Which are you going to have, Torano-san? Beef or fish?”

“Seafood, I think.”

“Then I’ll have steak!”

She gave me a curious look but didn’t say anything. After we were finished ordering, the young lady told us to enjoy our baths, and we headed upstairs to the hot spring.

“Aha ha ha... This is amazing!”

“It really is.”

We submerged ourselves in the warm water, our voices sounding like they were melting. This particular hot spring wasn’t too hot or too cool, plus a cold autumn breeze blew in through the open window, from which we had a gorgeous view of the Pacific Ocean and Enoshima. I felt like I could stay in here forever.

It was the afternoon on a weekday. And taking a dip in a hot spring while I was on a field trip made me feel a little naughty. It was amazing. I let out a noise like an old man would make.

“Haaaah...”

It seemed like Torano-san was just as content as I was. Normally her expression didn’t change much, but her cheeks were slightly pink as she soaked in the water. *She’s got such beautiful skin...* I couldn’t help but stare at her.

Her skin was just slightly flushed right now, but she was pale and her skin was so flawless she reminded me of a snow fairy. Not the evil ones, but like...ethereal and beautiful. Looking at her made me feel like I would melt into the water even though it wasn’t very hot.

Her breasts weren’t as big as Chi-chan’s but about average-sized. She had a very feminine figure, though. I never really noticed it before because she was so shy and had such a poker face all the time. But once guys picked up on her potential, they wouldn’t leave her alone. Yashiro-kun had really gotten to her quickly.

“What?” Suddenly we made eye contact.

“Oh, I was just thinking about how you have a really nice figure.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. *Hm? Did what I just said sound like sexual harassment?*

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. You’ve got a really nice body!”

“No, I don’t,” she said quietly. “They’re not as...big as yours or Ido-san’s.”

She didn’t clarify *what* wasn’t as big, but I should note that it was just a coincidence that Yuzu-chan’s name wasn’t mentioned. *Got that, Yuzu-chan? I promise!*

“Oh, trust me. You have more than enough of what guys like.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you ever shown them to Yashiro-kun?”

“No, no! Absolutely not!” She shook her head so fast I thought it might fly off. It was so unusual for her to react like that I couldn’t help but stare.

I suppose that made sense though, since they botched their first kiss and hadn’t gone to the beach together so she could show off her body in a bikini. For some reason her face was bright red, though.

Hm. So that means I’ve seen something he hasn’t even seen yet. I felt pretty proud about that.

“Why are you waving your hands like you’re worshiping me?”

“I was thinking about a poem we read in literature class. You know, the one that was all, ‘Are you sure you’re not gonna touch my beautiful skin? Touch me already!’”

“Are you talking about Akiko Yosano’s poem? She’s not *that* much of a tsundere.”

No wonder she was on the library committee. She knew exactly what I was talking about, even from my poor explanation. She looked up at the high ceiling and recited the poem:

“You preach much about virtue—

A hot current of blood

flows beneath my soft skin

which you do not dare to touch.

Doesn’t it make you lonely?”

“Yeah, yeah. That one.” I giggled. Her soft voice had a sing-song quality to it. “It’s a shame Yashiro-kun hasn’t seen your soft, beautiful skin yet.”

Blorp.

She sank beneath the surface of the water. Torano-san was so adorable.

All right, now that we were done with our bath, it was time to eat! We went downstairs to the restaurant and presented our tickets at the counter, then returned to our seats and sat down. I checked my phone and saw that I had received a text. *Hm? It’s from Chi-chan... What?*

“What is it?” Torano-san asked when she saw me freeze as I looked at my phone.

“Chi-chan sent me a text with this picture.” I showed Torano-san my phone.

She had a very troubled look on her face. Normally she was so impassive, but now she was so obvious.

“Heh heh. Does it bother you?” I teased.

“No.” She turned away in a huff. “I’m sure they just ran into each other, that’s all.”

That certainly didn’t match her expression. I smirked at her, but just then the buzzer went off to let us know our food was done. We quickly got up to retrieve it.

“Ohhh, they’re bowls!”

“Yeah.”

They just gave us the choice between beef or fish but didn’t really explain

anything else, so I was curious about what the food would be like. It turned out to be bowls with miso soup, pickled vegetables, and a dessert, plus some roasted green tea.

I got the steak bowl and Torano-san got the broiled salmon and shirasu bowl.

Ahh, they both look so good!

We took a seat at the counter and I took out my chopsticks. "Let's eat!"

"Yeah..."

We both started eating. I broke up the boiled egg on top of my bowl into little pieces so I could eat it with the bite-size steak, then dipped it in the sauce. Then I piled it all onto my chopsticks and shoved it into my mouth. A nice bath in the hot springs and a delicious meal. This was heaven.

"Ohmagah, diz iz so yammy!" I said as I chewed.

"Is that Kyushu dialect?"

"No, my mouth was just full."

"Ah, I see." She shot a look at me and sipped her miso soup. "Ahh, I love the shirasu. Food in Kamakura is so good."

"You eat like a princess."

"I do?"

"What's in your bowl?"

"It has broiled salmon and shirasu, and something like a rice cracker with crispy shirasu."

"Seems like they put shirasu in everything here! Hey, you wanna share a bite with each other?"

"So that's what you meant when you said you'd get the beef. Sure, I don't mind."



We continued eating until halfway through, when we switched our bowls so we could taste the other kind. The beef was good, but the fatty salmon was delicious too. I thought I detected a hint of a smile on Torano-san's face when she was eating the beef too.

It was relaxing to eat by yourself, but food tasted good when you ate it with someone else too. It was good both ways, and you couldn't deny one or the other—that was Yashiro-kun and Torano-san's opinion, and I had to admit I was drawn to it.

"It's hard to eat when you're staring at me like that," Torano-san said as I stared at her.

I smiled shamelessly. "Doesn't it feel like we're on an all-girls' trip? Doing this kind of thing together?"

"A little bit, yeah."

"Right? I was just thinking how fun it would be if you, Chi-chan, Yuzu-chan, and I all went on a trip together. I bet if we talked about it in front of Yashiro-kun and Yukito-kun, they'd get so jealous that they couldn't come!"

She must have been imagining that reaction, because she began to giggle. "Okay, that might be fun."

"Let's plan a trip together, then!"

"I'll think about it."

Hm, so she won't say yes. Her guard is so high. Still, I was making progress, so that was a good sign. I merrily sipped on my tea.

After we finished our lunch, we took some detours and then headed for the meeting point of Hasedera. I didn't get to spend as much time alone as I had hoped for, but it was all good in the end since I got unexpectedly closer (at least I hoped) to Torano-san!

We turned left at the intersection and passed the souvenir shops. Right as we came upon the entrance to Hasedera, we could see the others there waiting for us. Yuzu-chan spotted us and waved.

"Oh, it looks like everyone's already here."

“Yep! Let’s go, *Tsugumi-chan*. Hey, everyone!” I tugged on her hand and waved cheerfully to the others.

Chapter Four Part B: A Trip through Kamakura (Yashiro's POV)

It was 10:30 a.m. near Tokei-ji.

A sweet sensation pervaded both inside of my mouth and inside of my heart. I had a feeling my face was bright red because of the look on Nue's face.

"How does it taste?" she asked.

I relented and said, "It might be a little too sweet for me."

That's odd. I'm sure I ordered a café latte. We were at a park at the foot of Tokei-ji that Nue had wanted to visit. After we said goodbye to the other four, we'd come here to this café to relax for a while.

It was a bit dark in here, but there was some light coming in from the windows. Since the mountains were nearby, there was no direct sunlight. Only the light from the bright glow of the lush scenery.

Even though this was supposedly a popular tourist spot, it had a surprisingly calm atmosphere.

Nue took a bite of her fruit tart and smiled at me. "Did you know that that one song took place here?" she said in a shy voice.

"Aren't there a lot of songs that take place in Kamakura? By Southern All Stars, for example."

"'Kamakura Story'? That one's famous, but...where does it take place, exactly?" Nue asked.

I tipped my head to the side. Now that I thought about it, the words "Kamakura" and "Enoden" showed up in the song, but they never really mentioned anywhere specific.

"They mention Endoshima and Yuigahama in other songs."

"They've got more of a mountain vibe than an ocean one."

“True.”

“I like mountains better. It’s more peaceful there,” she said with a shy smile. *She’s so cute.*

“Yeah. I like spending time with you like this too.”

“Huh?”

I took the fork from her hand and cut off a piece of her fruit tart, then held it out to her. “Open up.”

“Ah...” She turned beet red. *See? It’s embarrassing, isn’t it?*

She glanced back and forth between the tart and my face for a while and then finally slightly opened her mouth and ate it. *Munch, munch.*

“Well? How does it taste?” I asked, and she frowned at me.

“Ridiculously sweet.”

“Right?” Now she knew how I felt.

Nue and I were really compatible and I adored her, but we didn’t exactly share the same interests. I liked being active, but she liked relaxing. I liked relaxing with her of course, but she didn’t like it when I always slowed down on her account. She wanted me to have fun.

But I wanted *her* to have fun, and to do the things she liked to do without worrying about me. So things ended up like this often.

“See you later, Nue.”

“Okay. Be careful, Hachijo-kun.”

We’d had a nice time together at the coffee shop, then walked around the road until we got to the T-junction by the entrance of Jochi-ji right before the railroad crossing. We stopped in front of an old-fashioned mailbox and then we went our own separate ways for a while.

I was going to head for Hasedera on foot from the side of Jochi-ji past the giant Buddha, taking the hiking trail. Nue would go towards the Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu Shrine. She would take a few detours before going to Hasedera.

We both wanted to enjoy our own activities, so that meant taking separate routes. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel anxious about leaving Nue alone, but I didn't want to force her to go along and do just the things I wanted to do. And she would probably say the same thing.

"Are you sure you'll be all right on your own? Will you be able to meet up with us later?"

"Yes, I'm fine. There's somewhere I want to go alone," she said with a smile. She gave me a concerned look. "I'm more worried about you, Hachijo-kun. You're taking a mountain path."

"Don't worry. Even kids go on that hiking trail. It'll be fine."

"Just make sure to stay alert. Don't get hurt." She looked very worried.

I nodded to reassure her. "I got it." There was no way I was showing up to Hasedera injured. I didn't want to see her sad, so I vowed to be careful.

"See ya."

"See you later."

And with that, we went off in our separate directions.

Once I'd said goodbye to Nue, I headed up the hilly road towards Jochi-ji. At first the path was paved with asphalt, but then stairs appeared towards the grassy mountain. After that, the stairs disappeared until it was just a dirt path laden with fallen leaves. The path became so narrow, it was difficult to pass others coming the other direction, and I felt a little scared when I saw the metal guard rails to keep people from falling off the side. Some places didn't have a guard rail at all.

As I went farther, the trail became even more wild, with nothing but dirt and trees everywhere. Tree roots grew out of the ground and I had to be careful not to trip. The path was wider now, but now I couldn't even see the trail at all, and began to get anxious.

If there hadn't been signs here and there directing people towards the giant Buddha, I would've gotten lost. *Good thing Nue didn't come along on this trip...*

Personally, I thought it was fun to jump over the logs and tree branches. Nue

would've had a hard time though, since she had worn her school uniform and leather loafers. "Well, I'd be lying if I said I didn't have any concerns about leaving Nue alone, but I feel uncomfortable forcing her to do what I want to do." It would be the same for her as well.

The path was muddy in spots. *I wonder if Nue's at Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu yet.* It was some distance from that T-intersection. I wondered if she was tired yet. *Well, if she is, I'm sure she can go into a café or something and rest. There are a lot of shops and restaurants on that street. Heh. I really can't stop thinking about Nue.*

Even though I was walking by myself, my thoughts kept drifting back to Nue. I wondered what she was doing, what she was looking at right now. *Maybe I'm missing you because we're apart.* That sounded like some kind of song lyric. But thinking of her made my heart feel warm, a certain sensation I could only have when we were apart.

Oh, I know. I took a picture of the tree roots crawling on the ground like a net.

YASHIRO: Look at this trail. It's pretty rough.

I sent her a text with the picture attached.

NUE: They look like capillaries.

She texted back. *Yeah, I can see that.* I navigated my way through the tree roots, being careful not to fall. Since it was a hiking trail, others passed by every now and then. Despite being a pretty treacherous path, there were certainly a lot of older people walking on it. And it was pretty clean for how many people were using it, so I wondered if someone came out regularly to pick up trash. Even if most people were conscientious about picking up after themselves, all it took was one rotten apple to spoil the bunch on a mountain trail like this.

I continued walking, and suddenly came upon a paved road. When I followed it, I found a temple with a park around it. The sign read "Genjiyama Park."

Oh, so this is Mt. Genji.

I'd really taken the reverse route from that song. *Hm? This was the shortest path from Kita-Kamakura to Mt. Genji, right?*

I checked a map on my phone. Yes, I was sure of it. Without taking any detours, this was the shortest route on foot. So was this the path from the song after all? There were just muddy spots, not really anywhere you would go on a date.

Maybe that's why they got dumped. I chuckled at the thought. *I'll ask Nue about it later.* I wondered how she would react. She would probably smile. I sat down on a nearby bench to take a break, grabbing a thermos from my backpack to drink some tea. Even though Nue and I had relaxed together for a while, there was no sense in hurrying to the meeting spot. I still had plenty of time. I could go see the giant Buddha and eat lunch if I wanted to. And since the weather was so nice, I might as well take my time.

The wind rustled the bright yellow leaves on the trees. I wondered if the trees had changed color where Nue was too.

Ding! My phone chimed. I received a picture of shoes on a stone staircase.

NUE: I accidentally stepped on some kind of baby rodent

NUE: It's fine and it ran away, but I still feel bad.

What the heck? I wondered if she was making some obscure joke, hoping I'd get it. I did my best, looking up species of rodents in Kamakura. *Ahh, that must be it.*

YASHIRO: If that baby's a masochist it might come back for you.

YASHIRO: And it'll say "I'm the rodent-like creature you stepped on!"

NUE: Ew, I don't want that

“Aha ha!” I pictured Nue’s dismayed face and laughed. Now that I was refreshed from talking with her, it was time to set off again. I started walking towards Hase again. The road was still paved, and split into two after a while.

If I take the right path, I’ll end up on the trail leading to the giant Buddha. The path to the left will take me to Zeniarai Benten and Kamakura Station.

Just as I thought I should probably take the right path, Ido-san, who we had said goodbye to at Engaku-ji, appeared from the left.

“Huh? Yashiro?”

“Ido-san?” She looked just as surprised as I was. “What are you doing here? I thought you and Torano-san were going to a temple.”

“We already did. We’re doing our own thing now. I walked from Kita-Kamakura and I’m headed to Hase. Nu—er, Torano-san is going to take the Enoden from Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu.”

“Ohh, so you guys had the same idea.”

According to Ido-san, she and Hanamizawa-san had also split up and were doing their own thing.

“Where did you two go before that?”

“I went along with Kanon as she ate different foods from Komachi Street. She just eats whatever she wants, regardless of how much sugar or how many calories it has. And then... Ha ha!” Ido-san suddenly burst out laughing.

“What happened?”

“I was just thinking, sometimes proverbs really do happen in real life! Pfft!”

“Huh?”

“Anyway, Kanon and I said goodbye at Kamakura Station, and then I dropped by Zeniarai Benten and came here. I was going to cut through the mountains to get to Hase, but...” She glanced at me. “If you’re headed in the same direction, maybe I’ll get a late start.”

“Huh? Why?” I asked with a serious look on my face. She stared at me

blankly.

“Don’t you want to walk by yourself? Since you’re not with Torano-san, I figured I’d just be in the way.”

“No, the reason I’m not with her is because she’s not the type who would enjoy walking on a mountain trail.” I realized Ido-san was trying to be considerate of me, but it was a bit misdirected. “You can’t underestimate the mountains.”

“Huh? Why are you suddenly talking like a mountain climber or something?”

“As I walked here from Kita-Kamakura, quite a lot of people passed by. I saw old people and really young kids who had no problem climbing the trail. But there were dangerous parts, and the path was rocky at times. One moment of distraction and you might fall.”

“Yeah... So what are you trying to say?”

“That when you walk in the mountains, if you have the option to choose between going alone or with a group, you should stay with a group.”

“Oh. So you’re saying we should walk together.”

“Yep.”

“Then why didn’t you just say so? Jeez,” she said with a sigh.

I scratched my head. “Sorry about that. I’m kind of bad at inviting people.”

I had spent so long thinking that being alone was easier. It was hard to ask someone to come along with me unless they were really close, like Nue. And in that case, I wouldn’t even have to ask. She would come along anyway.

“My communication abilities are only at level five.”

“That sounds like a line from an anime or something.”

“Anyway, do you want to come with me? I promised Torano-san I wouldn’t get hurt. So it’ll be safer if someone comes with me.”

“Sure. After what you said, I’m starting to feel anxious about walking alone too.”

But just as we were about to set off, another message arrived. I thought it

was from Nue again, but this time it was from Hadori-kun.

HADORI: Someone was hitting on your wife so I rescued her.

“Nue?!” I suddenly yelled, startling Ido-san.

“Whoa! Wh-What?”

Someone was hitting on Nue? She was definitely cute. She didn’t tend to stand out because she was so shy, but she had a beautiful face and her modest demeanor came off as very graceful. Not only that, she was also a bookworm and an intellectual, which only made her more attractive. I had to commend whoever noticed Nue’s charms.

But that didn’t mean I wanted them flirting with her!

“Sorry. I have to go to Hachiman-gu.”

“Huh?! Wait! Did something happen?”

I showed Ido-san the message. “See? So I gotta go right n— Argh!”

Ido-san grabbed me by the collar before I could run off. “I said, wait!”

Cough, cough! O-Oof, I can’t breathe. “What are you doing?” I protested through tears.

“You need to calm down!” Ido-san said, pulling the phone out of my hands. She typed something, then brought it to her ear. “Hello? Yukito? What was that text all about?”

She’d decided to call Hadori-kun. I couldn’t hear him clearly, but it was definitely his voice speaking on the other end.

“What? No, I just ran into him. And now he’s trying to run straight to Hachiman-gu, but I stopped him. All because *you* said someone hit on her. Yeah... Yeah. What? What do you mean? It *is* a big deal! You really are so dumb. Yeah... Yeah... Fine, but you better apologize later. Okay, bye.” She hung up.

Ahh, I wanted to talk to him myself.

She handed the phone back to me. “Don’t worry. She wasn’t in any danger. Yukito just likes to exaggerate sometimes.” She relayed to me what he had told her. If it was true, then the problem was already solved, and Nue was safe. She was already somewhere else.

I let out a weak sigh. “Jeez, talk about giving me a heart attack!”

“That’s my line! You guys are all such troublemakers.”

“Sorry about that.” I realized now that I’d lost my cool.

Ido-san laughed. “Whatever, it’s fine. Now, should we go?”

“Ahh, yeah.” I managed to regain my composure and nodded.

The route from Mt. Genji to the Kamakura giant Buddha was even more dangerous than the route from Kita-Kamakura to Mt. Genji. There were no stairs and huge boulders were just lying in the way at several spots.

“Man, this really is way more like mountain climbing than I expected. It’s a lot tougher than hiking.”

I agreed. Did the old people I’d seen before come from this way? If so, I had a ton of respect for them.

“Well, at least it’ll be good exercise.”

“Yeah. I’m glad I wore my gym clothes.”

Ido-san and I chatted as we climbed the path. Sometimes I had to lend her a hand, and sometimes she had to return the favor. When the path got too rough, we fell silent so we could concentrate, and then started talking once it got easier again. It was strangely relaxing.

“By the way...” Ido-san said as soon as we had cleared a large boulder and grass as tall as we were.

“Hm? What?”

“You screamed something weird when you got that text from Yukito. Nue, or something like that? What was that all about?”

“Oh...that.” *She heard me say it...*

A thoughtful look came over her face. "Is that your nickname for Torano-san?"

"Er, why do you say that?"

"It's obvious just by your reaction. Even though you two are dating, you still call her Torano-san in front of all of us, right? I always thought it sounded awkward coming from you, and wondered if you actually called her something else in private."

She's too perceptive. Why do people with lots of friends have to be so observant?

Ido-san smirked at me and slid an arm around my shoulder. "Well? Do you call her Nue?"

"Yeah..." I relented after a pause.

She gave me a puzzled look. "But her name is Tsugumi Torano, right? So why do you call her Nue?"

"It's not really a fun story," I said hesitantly.

Ido-san let go of me. "What? Is it something depressing?"

"It has to do with a complex she has."

"Oh, I see. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Well, it doesn't bother her as much anymore. But if you promise not to tell anyone, I'll tell you."

She thought about it for a moment. I had a feeling she was thinking that she was curious, but wondered if it was something she shouldn't know about. But at the same time, she still really wanted to know. After a while, her curiosity won out.

"Okay. I promise I won't tell."

"Swear?"

"I swear on Kanon's soul."

"You really love shonen manga, don't you?" I knew that Ido-san was someone who kept her word, so I figured it was okay to tell her. I explained the story

about how I came to call Nue by her nickname. I told her how she had a complex about her name sounding like the *yokai*, and when I'd said the word Nue sounded like a cute nickname, surprisingly, she agreed.

Partway through my story, Ido-san puckered up her lips. "Ew, that's so sappy!" And after she finished hearing the whole thing, she gave me an annoyed look. "Wait, you mean to tell me the nickname for your girlfriend is a *yokai*?!"

"Yeah...but she likes it."

Ido-san sighed. "I guess that just goes to show how much she trusts you." She laughed. "But after hearing that story, I can tell why she fell in love with you."

"Huh?"

"Well, you understood how she had a complex about it and turned it into something she could laugh about, right? Girls like having someone who can understand them. People like that are special."

Are they? I don't really get it.

"Never mind. This isn't like me," Ido-san said, suddenly sounding shy. She began walking ahead to hide her blushing face. I followed after her.

"We should reach our destination soon, right?" she turned around and asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I think so. I hear cars in the distance." The trail was beginning to feel more like stairs in a park. We parted through the tall grass and finally came out onto the road, marking the end to the hiking trail.

"Where are we?"

"Behind the giant Buddha, I think." According to my phone, we were right behind Kotoku-in. If we continued walking towards the ocean, we'd reach our meeting point at Hasedera.

Ido-san stretched. "That was a great workout. I feel so much better now."

"Good for you."

"Now what should we do? There's still time before we have to meet up with everyone."

It was a little past 2 p.m. The trail hadn't taken as long as I expected.

"We can eat lunch first, and then go see the giant Buddha."

"Sounds good to me. But are you sure I can come with?" she asked hesitantly.

We had taken the trail together because it was too dangerous to go at it alone, but now that we were back on the normal road, there was technically no reason for us to stay together. That was probably what was going through her head.

I shrugged. "Sure, why not? We're gonna meet up with everyone soon anyway."

"Are you sure? Okay, then. Oh, that's right!" She took out her phone and held it out in front of her. *Is she taking a selfie?*

She smirked and then typed something on her phone.

"Hm? What are you doing?"

She looked at me and grinned. "Just a little prank."

"A prank?"

"It's nothing. Let's go." She started walking up ahead. *What was that all about?*

We walked along the path and came out in front of the gate to Kotoku-in.

"Hm? Yukito and Yuzuki?"

"Oh hey, you're right." We spotted Hadori-kun and Sato-san in front of a souvenir shop by Kotoku-in's gate.

"Hm? Chikaze? Yashiro?"

"What are you two doing here together?"

They both looked surprised to see us. Ido-san groaned. "One day, I came across Yashiro in the mountains."

"Why are you talking like he's a bear you ran into in the forest?" Sato-san looked at us, but all I could do was laugh. It wasn't like Ido-san was lying. But I suppose if someone ran into a bear in Kamakura, it would be a pretty big deal.

Meanwhile, Hadori-kun managed to put two and two together and clapped his hands. “Ohh, so *that’s* why Chikaze called me!”

“Yep. So? What about you two? You went to Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu, right?” Ido-san asked, and Hadori-kun nodded.

“Then we went to Komachi Street and looked around there for a while before coming back to Hase. We realized we still had lots of time before having to meet up with everyone, so we decided to go see the giant Buddha. But we found a weird souvenir shop on the way, so we checked it out.”

“A weird souvenir shop?”

“Yeah, it’s over there. It’s called Sankaido. You’ll know it when you see it,” he said, pointing. I didn’t have to go inside to see that it was pretty unusual. They had the goods displayed outside. I don’t know why a tourist spot would be selling wooden swords. Not only that, but they also had armor, helmets, and shuriken.

Of course they were all replicas, but why sell those here?

“I’m sure foreign tourists get a kick out of it,” Ido-san said as she went inside. I shared her sentiment.

The interior of the souvenir shop was even wilder, with replicas of katana and jitte. To add to the chaotic atmosphere, there was your standard souvenir shop fare of Kamakura goods, snacks, Japanese-style hand towels, and fans.

“This *is* a weird store. But it’s kind of exciting, don’t you think?” Hadori-kun asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I get that.” Seeing all the fantasy weapons lined up next to each other stirred my inner middle schooler. *I wonder what Nue would think if I brought her here.* Some of the weapons looked like something out of a novel, and were surprisingly intricate.

We walked around the shop for a while. I spotted a corner that sold Kamakura carvings. I walked over to the display case to get a closer look.

“Hm? A comb?” Hadori-kun peeked over my shoulder. I was looking at a translucent carved comb. It seemed a little pricey, but it was a nice reddish-

brown with cherry blossoms carved into it.

Hadori-kun laughed and slipped his arm around my shoulder. He was very close.

“What? Present for the wife?”



“I think so. Although I might be buying it for myself.”

“Huh? You use combs like that?” He gave me a puzzled look, seemingly imagining me brushing my hair with it.

I laughed and shook my head. “No, I was thinking about using it to comb through Torano-san’s hair. Sometimes she lets me touch her hair, like when we’re together in the library.”

We would sit at the circulation desk together and she’d let me brush her hair while she read. I would gently lift up her silky black hair and run the teeth of the comb through it. I figured she always had a shy look on her face when I did that, but she never acted like she didn’t like it. She let me do it because I wanted to, while she enjoyed doing what she wanted to do.

I felt warm inside when I thought about those moments with her, and Hadori-kun nodded. “Ah, I see.”

“Huh? What?”

“Remember how I asked how you two could just sit there in silence with each other? I thought it was strange, but now I get it. You guys are totally sappy even without having to talk.” Hadori-kun smirked at me, whacking me on the shoulder. “You act like you’re all proper, but you’re still getting the job done, huh?”

“Can you not talk about me like I’m some kind of pervert?”

“Aren’t you? Both of you.”

Hmm... Honestly, I could kind of picture Nue as a closeted pervert. She’d say “Oh, I’m not interested in that kind of stuff...” all while being super dirty. *Ugh, she’s so adorable.* If she ever said that while blushing, I think I’d lose it.

“Aha ha! What are you imagining right now?!” It must have shown on my face, because Hadori-kun burst out laughing.

In the end, I did buy the comb. It cost about half the price of a new video game, but I had no regrets.

We left the weird souvenir shop and went to see the giant Buddha at Kotoku-in. I’d been there in grade school, and since then I never felt like I’d come to

Kamakura until I saw that old-fashioned smile. We talked about getting lunch somewhere before it was time to meet up with everyone else.

“Did you two already decide on where to eat, Yashiro?” Hadori-kun asked. Ido-san and I glanced at each other.

“I don’t have any ideas. What about you, Yashiro?”

“Hm, I was thinking about going to the hole-in-the-wall soba place Nu—I mean, Torano-san told me about. You can eat vegan soba there.”

“Vegan soba?”

“Yeah, the broth is made out of mushrooms rather than bonito flakes so that monks in training can eat it.”

“Oh, that sounds good.” Sato-san seemed interested, but Hadori-kun had a strange look on his face.

“I guess that sounds good, but...not very filling.”

“Perfect for Kanon, then,” Ido-san said with a laugh. Just how much had Hanamizawa-san eaten today?

Sato-san clapped her hands. “I know! Why don’t we go to the seafood rice bowl restaurant that we saw on the way? It mainly serves raw shirasu, but if I remember correctly, the fishing season for whitebait will be closed from January. We won’t get another chance to eat raw shirasu for a while.”

“Hm? You sure know a lot about it.”

“I was looking forward to it, so I did some research.”

“Heh heh. Good for you, Yuzuki.” Ido-san poked Sato-san on her cheek. She looked shy, but didn’t object to it.

I was strangely moved by the sight. She was just as introverted as Nue, but she took the initiative to suggest a plan to everyone else. She was lucky to be in a group of people who were accepting of her, and her desire to change seemed to be heading in a positive direction.

“That sounds good to me. What do you think, Yashiro?” Hadori-kun asked.

I shrugged. “We won’t be able to eat for a while, so the raw shirasu bowl

sounds good to me. I'll try the vegan soba next time with Torano-san."

"Heh heh. How romantic."

"Yeah, yeah. Say whatever you want."

I didn't mind whether I ate alone or in a group. I was confident that I'd have a good meal either way. But food did tend to taste more delicious when I was with Nue.

Ido-san, Hadori-kun, and Sato-san all had great personalities, and I knew from listening to them talk that we would have a good time going out to eat together.

While I followed the three of them, I looked up towards the autumn sky. *I wonder where Nue is, and what she's doing right now.* We had only been apart for a short time, but there were so many things I wanted to tell her about.

I want to see her right now. I couldn't wait until I met back up with her again.

Chapter Four Part C: A Trip through Kamakura (Yuzuki & Yukito's POV)

It was just past ten o'clock in the morning along the road in Kita-Kamakura.

"Oh, it says this is shrimp curry. It looks delicious, doesn't it?" Yukito-kun said, reading the sign board along the side of the road. He was perfectly calm as usual, totally oblivious to my inner thoughts.

"It's too early for lunch. They're not even open yet."

"Aha ha, that's too bad." He had a carefree smile on his face. There was something about his smile that always seemed to draw people in.

After we had said goodbye to Kanon-san, Chikaze-san, Yashiro-kun, and Torano-san in front of Enkaku-ji, Yukito-kun and I walked along the train tracks towards Kamakura. Kanon-san and Chikaze-san went back to Kita-Kamakura Station, and Yashiro-kun and Torano-san took a left after crossing the railroad.

All of a sudden, I was alone with Yukito-kun. My heart was pounding, but how was he feeling? I wanted to know, but at the same time I was a little scared.

Just then, Yukito-kun yawned and stretched. "It's a really nice day. It definitely feels like autumn."

"I know. The black kites look like they're enjoying it too." When I looked up at the sky, I could see two of them circling around. They almost looked as if they were dancing. They must have been friends. I wondered what they thought of us.

"I'm sorry, Yuzuki," he murmured suddenly.

"Huh?" I wasn't sure what he meant. "Why are you apologizing?"

"I know you wanted to enjoy time with everyone, unlike Kanon and Chikaze. And yet I went along with everyone else and agreed to do separate activities. I just feel bad about it," he said, scratching his head.

Oh, that's all? I smiled at him. "Ha ha. It's okay. I adore Kanon-san and Chikaze-san, so I'd rather they have fun doing what they want anyway. And I think you're a wonderful person for encouraging them to do so."

"Y-Yeah? Jeez, now I feel embarrassed," he said, scratching his head again. I really felt that way, though.

"There are people like Kanon-san and Chikaze-san who have started to discover the joy of being alone. Yashiro-kun and Torano-san already know all about it, but they still want to spend time together. And then there are people like you, who want to laugh and have fun surrounded by others. People who do what they want to do seem to shine, even if others don't fully understand them. I want everyone to be that happy."

"Is that what you want to do? Watch others be happy?" he asked.

I tilted my head to the side. "Hmm, I guess I do."

"Then you're doing what you want to do right now... No wonder you're sparkling," he said with a mischievous chuckle.

I'm sparkling?

I suppose now that I thought about it, I was the one who brought it up. I guess it was true. I suddenly felt like I'd said something really corny. *Ugh, I'm so embarrassed!*

"Ha ha ha. Well then, how about we get out there and enjoy Kamakura together?" he said.

"Um, yeah! Let's enjoy our time alone together!" I pumped my fist in the air, trying to hide my embarrassment.



Yuzuki Sato was a sweet girl, perfectly befitting of her name. She was soft and gentle, with a warm smile and a reserved personality. From a man's point of view, there was something about her that made you want to protect her. But because of that, I got involved in the incident with the girls from her old school who were harassing her.

Luckily, the girls at our school were all good-natured, so that wouldn't happen

here. Still, Yuzuki had this unique way of charming those around her. Kanon and Chikaze were immediately fond of her, and now it felt like they'd all been friends for ages.

Yuzuki and I walked the streets of Kita-Kamakura together.

Unlike Yashiro, I had more fun hanging out in big groups than by myself. I generally preferred to do things in groups, so whenever I had free time, I'd always try to find someone else to hang with. It was pretty rare for me to be alone or with just one other person. So honestly, I was feeling a bit hesitant with this current situation.

I wonder if Yuzuki's bored, I thought as I glanced over at her. She was walking next to me with a smile on her face. When I'm in a crowd, if I see someone who looks bored, I'll talk to them. And if I start running out of things to talk about, I'll pass the baton and go find someone else to talk to. I can switch gears like that pretty naturally, so I don't have to put on a bubbly front when I'm with my friends.

But I couldn't do that when it was just the two of us. If the person you are talking to is passive, it falls to you to come up with things to talk about. That can be exhausting, sometimes even to the point of getting irritated with them. I like being with people, so I didn't want to hate those around me.

That was the reason I'd turned down several girls who asked me to go out with them.

If I had a girlfriend she might ask me, "Which is more important, me or your friends?" I'd probably end up disliking her for having to choose one or the other. Both were equally important to me, but I doubted there was a girl out there who would be satisfied with that answer. That's why I'd never had a girlfriend until now.

I'd asked Yashiro how he and Torano-san could just sit in silence together. I hadn't meant it as a joke; it was a genuine question. Those two could have a good time together even without speaking, and managed to maintain a good relationship.

I couldn't help but be puzzled by it. He'd taught Kanon how to enjoy time alone, but at this point I'd need him to give me lessons on how to spend time

alone as a couple.

Then maybe I could entertain Yuzuki a bit more.

“About what I said earlier,” Yuzuki suddenly said to me.

“Hm? What?”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re not bored being with just me?” she asked with a slightly embarrassed smile.

Had she read my mind? I quickly shook my head. “No, no, I’m glad that you’re here. If you had said that you wanted to do something by yourself too, I might have felt a little lonely.” It was pretty embarrassing to say that, so I scratched my head.

Yuzuki giggled. “You seem more like yourself when you’re having a good time with your friends.”

“Right? I’m sorry, but I just don’t get Kanon and Chikaze wanting to spend time alone.”

“And yet you still encouraged them.”

“They’re my friends, and I want them to have a good time.”

“That’s why I feel so at ease when I’m with you, because you’re that kind of person—someone who is himself when he’s surrounded by a lot of people and laughing. You’re the kind of person who can’t help but reach out to someone feeling down.” Yuzuki smiled softly.

Jeez, this really is embarrassing.

After crossing the railroad and walking for a while, we came to a stone pillar carved with the words “Kencho-ji.”

Oh, I think I came here on a field trip in elementary school. Just then, I saw someone else from our school standing in front of the stone pillars, looking quite gloomy. He had a large build and wore his hair short, but not quite completely shaved. *I’m pretty sure that guy is...*

“Is something wrong?” Yuzuki asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh, I know that guy over there. He’s in the other class. His name is

Tatsuaki...likanji, I think?”

“likanji? Isn’t there a temple called that near our school?”

“That’s right. He’s the son of the head monk there. He looks upset for some reason.”

Even though I’d never talked to him myself, I knew who he was. Everyone talked about him because he was the son of the temple, as well as because of some strange rumors that he had ESP. But I got the impression that he was a bit socially awkward and a bit of an airhead. What had happened to him?

When I saw someone who looked that upset, I just couldn’t leave them alone. But right now, I was supposed to be spending time with Yuzuki. If I went to him, wouldn’t it be like abandoning her? But I didn’t want to make her feel upset either.

This is why I’ve never had a girlfriend. I hate having to make a decision like this.

“I’m worried about him. Let’s go talk to him, Yukito-kun,” she said. I blinked at her in surprise.

“Are you sure? You don’t know him, do you?”

She smiled at me. “I know you’re not the kind of person who can just leave him alone. Also, I want to overcome my shyness. I want to help someone, just like how you all reached out to me when I was in trouble.”

“Ha ha. Guess there was no need for me to hesitate.” Her words warmed my heart.

Instead of making me choose between her and my friends, she encouraged me to go help someone and even offered to come with me. It had never occurred to me that there were people like that. Come to think of it, Kanon and Chikaze were like that too. Yashiro understood and respected us, even if we had different ways of thinking. So did Yuzuki, for that matter.

I took a deep breath and jogged over to likanji. “Hey, likanji. Why do you look so upset?” I asked as I stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

Although he was built like a warrior monk, he had the puppy dog eyes of a

chihuahua. “Oh, Hadori-dono. Good afternoon to you.”

Ah, that’s right. I had nearly forgotten. Since Ikanji was raised in the temple, he spoke in a really old-fashioned, formal way.

Yuzuki came over. “Hello...Ikanji-kun, right?”

“Good afternoon to you. Hadori-dono, who is this young lady?”

“Young lady? You know she’s the same age as us, right?” I said, amused. “This is my friend Yuzuki.”

He nodded. “True, true. I am called Tatsuaki Ikanji. It’s my distinct pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m Yuzuki Sato. Nice to meet you.”

The two of them shook hands. I realized how much progress Yuzuki had made overcoming her shyness.

“Are you here by yourself? Where’s everyone from your group?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

Ikanji’s shoulders sagged as he let out a dry laugh. “Well, you see, I got carried away talking about the temple and they left me behind. Because of my family’s business, I get quite passionate when it comes to temples and shrines, you see. They said, ‘If you like it so much, why don’t you just stay here instead?’ Quite considerate folks, I must say. We already took our two photographs at Engaku-ji and Kencho-ji, so I suppose the next time I reunite with them will be at the final meeting place...”

“O-Oh...”

“I-I’m sorry to hear that...”

Neither Yuzuki nor I were quite sure how to respond.

If they had said that and left him behind just to be mean, then I would have been angry with them. But according to his story, it actually sounded like they were trying to let the guy have his fun. I couldn’t really complain if that was the case. Since the decline of school caste systems, people often grew distant trying to be considerate of each other like this.

“By the way, what were you telling them about?”

“Ah, yes... Kencho-ji is a temple of the Zen sect of Buddhism called the Rinzai sect, but there is a place where Jizo Bodhisattva is the principal object of worship. Since the principal objects of worship in Zen Buddhism are Amitabha Buddha and Gautama Buddha, this is quite rare. It is said that this is because Jigokudani, located within the Kencho-ji Temple, was once a place of execution, and that the Jizo Bodhisattva of that temple was brought over,” he explained in a flowing tone.

“O-Oh, I see.” Yeah, he definitely grew up in a temple. I didn’t even know the difference between Amitabha Buddha and Gautama Buddha, but he was just casually going on about it.

Suddenly, he seemed to come back to his senses and held his head in his hands. “I’ve gone and done it again,” he muttered. “That was just how I was talking before, and this is the behavior that ended up getting me left behind.”

“Ah... No worries, dude.” I whacked Ikanji on the shoulder.

Yuzuki giggled. “You certainly know a lot about it. I can tell how passionate you are.”

“You really understand, Sato-dono?!”

“Not one bit, but it was fun to listen to!”

“I am in shock!”

“It’s fun to hear what people like and what they’re good at. You learn about a whole new world and gain new experiences from it.”

“Yeah. And it’s fun seeing how expressive people get when they talk about something they’re passionate about.” It seemed like Yuzuki and I shared the same opinion. “So, why don’t we stick together for a while? I want to hear more about your story.”

“What? Ah, er, that’s... Well, I’m grateful...” Ikanji glanced back and forth between me and Yuzuki. “But are you sure? Aren’t you two on a date?”

“Da—?!” Yuzuki’s face turned bright red.

It was funny how she was always so expressive too. I never got tired of

looking at her. I tapped likanji on the shoulder.

“We’re just together because the rest of our group went off on their own. We don’t mind bringing someone along on our journey, especially if we enjoy their company!”

“That’s right. I also want to hear more of your story, likanji-kun,” Yuzuki said, finally recovering.

likanji relented and nodded. “Well, if it’s okay with you two, then by all means...”

“Okay. Let’s set out again with our new friend!”

“Yeah!”

“That would be splendid.”

Yuzuki and likanji both raised their fists enthusiastically.



We asked likanji-kun to take us around Kencho-ji Temple and tell us about it in detail. After that, we headed to the Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu Shrine.

“So, what kind of god is Hachiman? Isn’t he different from the Great Buddha?”

“The Great Bodhisattva Hachiman was originally associated with the empress Jingu and her son, the deified Emperor Ojin, but gradually became known as the god of war, and came to be worshiped by samurai. It is enshrined here at Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu Shrine because the Genji clan, who were the samurai government, also worshiped it.”

Yukito-kun and I walked around Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu while we listened to likanji-kun’s commentary. As expected of the son of a temple, he seemed to have a solid knowledge of the gods and Buddhas, and could easily answer any of our questions in detail. We were definitely getting our education on this field trip.

We had come in from the direction of Kencho-ji, and decided to visit the main shrine. There were quite a few groups taking photos at the front.

“The Great Bodhisattva Hachiman is an assimilation of both Shinto and Buddhism tradition, but since this is a shrine we must bow twice, clap twice, and then bow once.”

We followed Ikanji-kun’s instructions.

Once we finished our visit, we descended a flight of stone steps past a large ginkgo tree...

“Eeek?!”

Rustle, rustle!

“Yuzuki?!”

Suddenly, something gray ran under my feet. I was so surprised that I almost missed my step. Yukito-kun immediately grabbed my arm to support me, which ended up with him basically hugging me from behind.

“Are you okay, Yuzuki?” His worried voice cried out from above my head.

“Y-Yes, thank you.” I regained my footing as my heart pounded wildly. “I’m sorry. Something suddenly ran under my feet and it startled me.”

“I do believe that was...a squirrel,” Ikanji-kun said, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand as he spied in the distance.

A squirrel?

“Kamakura has a lot of black kites, but there are also a lot of squirrels.”

“O-Oh. I’m sure it was cute, but it happened so suddenly it just scared me...”

“Well, they are technically rodents. You can’t tell them apart from a rat in an instant.”

Ugh, that makes squirrels seem scary after all.

“Well, I’m just glad you weren’t hurt. Hmm?” Yukito-kun suddenly squinted his eyes and looked into the distance.

“What is it?”

“Isn’t that Torano-san over there?” He pointed to the left side of the road that extended straight from the stone stairway towards the torii gate.

There was a black-haired girl near the road leading to Hataage Benzaiten Shrine. She looked like Torano-san, but she wasn't with Yashiro-kun. Instead, she was with a girl and a boy who had his hair dyed. With how reserved Torano-san was, it didn't seem likely that she knew those two. I wondered if she was in trouble.

"Let's go, Yuzuki. You come too, Iikanji." Yukito-kun must have had the same idea.

"All right!"

"Understood."

We hurried over to Torano-san.

"C'mon, wouldn't you rather come hang out with us instead of staying here alone?" The boy with the dyed hair seemed to be trying to hit on Torano-san, who stood frozen. The girl, dressed in slightly out-of-date *gyaru* fashion, just watched the exchange with a bemused smile on her face.

I can't let them get away with this!

I stepped in between Torano-san and the others and pulled her towards me. "Just what do you think you're doing? You're clearly making her uncomfortable!" I mustered up all my courage and glared at the boy. I was a bit afraid after the incident with Misono-san and the others, but I did my best to try to appear fierce in order to protect Torano-san.

"What? No, er... I wasn't trying to do anything to her..." he stammered.

"See? You're so direct, they think you were trying to hit on her!" The girl let out a sigh.

Hm? This isn't how I thought they'd react.

"I'm okay. Let go of me," Torano-san said, sounding troubled. I did as she asked, wondering what was going on. Just then, Yukito-kun and Iikanji-kun arrived.

"I had a feeling it was Ginga and Biina. What are you guys doing?"

"Oh, it's Ishikuma-dono and Shindo-dono. Good afternoon to you."

They greeted the pair without seeming particularly cautious of them, so I figured they knew each other. Now that I thought about it, I had reached Torano-san first because the others had stopped after recognizing them.

Yukito-kun introduced the two of them... “The flirty one here is Ginga, and the flashy one over there is Biina. They’re in Class B with Iikanji, and I hang out with them every once in a while.”

“What’s up? I’m Ginga Ishikuma. But you can call me Gin-chan.”

“Hiiii, I’m Biina Shindo.”

The two of them greeted me with a smile. *Wait, they’re super friendly?!*

“So what were you bothering Torano-san about?” Yukito-kun asked, and Ginga-kun quickly shook his head.

“I wasn’t bothering her. I saw her walking by herself, so I invited her to hang out with us. I mean, we’re on a field trip and everything, so I thought it was kinda sad that she was all alone.”

Yukito-kun let out a sigh. “Listen, man, first you gotta check and see what she wants. There are lots of people who prefer to be alone nowadays. Maybe she wanted to walk by herself instead of being in a group.”

“See? This is why I told you to mind your own beeswax!” Biina-san shrugged, clearly fed up with him.

I was relieved to learn that they meant no harm. Meanwhile, Yukito-kun continued his conversation with the two of them. “Also, Torano-san has a boyfriend. They’re just doing their own thing right now, that’s all.”

“For real?!”

“So you *were* trying to hit on her!”

“No! I just thought she was cute, okay?” Ginga-kun said in a pouting voice.

Biina-san laughed out loud. “Ginga’s got a thing for weird girls like her. But man, this might be a record for how fast he got dumped!”

“I said, that’s not how I meant it!”

Uh-oh, Torano-san seems shocked that she called her weird.

Yukito-kun put Ginga-kun into a headlock and forced him to bow his head to Torano-san.

“Owww! That really, really hurts, dude!”

“Sorry, Torano-san. I promise they’re not bad kids. They were just being really pushy about wanting to help. Forgive them, okay?”

“Hey, wait a second! Don’t lump me into this!” Biina-san said with a pout.

Torano-san shook her head. “It’s okay. It took me too long to reply, so I made the situation worse. Also...” She glanced at me. “Thanks for trying to protect me.” She gave me a soft smile. Normally she was so impassive, so seeing that smile on her face made quite an impact. No wonder Yashiro-kun was crazy about her.

“Heh heh. Of course. You helped me out before too, Torano-san.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why are you so stubborn about that?”

Honestly... She and Yashiro-kun really were the perfect couple. After that, she bowed her head to us one more time and then left. Yukito-kun let go of Ginga-kun and took out his phone. “I should report this to Yashiro...” He started texting something. I wondered if he was going to tell him what just happened.

Biina-san came up to me and said, “Hey. What’s your name...Sato-san, right? You, Yukito, and Ikanji sure make an interesting combo. Torano-san rejected us, but can we hang out with *you*?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

You know what they say, “No journey is long with good company.” The more the merrier. I wanted to become the kind of person who could get close to anyone and who others enjoyed being around. That was my goal.

Besides, Yukito-kun looked best when he was laughing with a group of people. Speaking of which, he was currently on the phone with someone. I thought he was just sending a text.

Biina-san suddenly clapped her hands. “All right! Have you guys decided where you’re going next? Hataage Benzaiten Shrine in Genji Pond, or Komachi

Street?”

“What’s at Genji Pond, again?”

“Supposedly, it’s a lucky place for couples to go. They have love fortunes there.”

“Huh? I thought that since the goddess Benten was so jealous, any couple that visited there would break up. Is that true, Ikanji-kun?” He would probably know the story better than me.

He nodded. “It is true that Benzaiten is a very jealous goddess. It is said that she became jealous when the hardworking servant of a certain monk gained a reputation for being very handsome. She turned that servant into a woman so people would begin to look down on the monk, as it seemed like he was too close with the woman.”

“She turned him into a woman? I feel like I see that trope a lot in manga lately.” Ginga-kun piped up. I had the same kind of feeling.

Then Biina-san tilted her head. “So then it’s *not* a lucky place for couples to go?”

“It still may be,” Ikanji-kun said, turning to look at the temple. “Kamakura is the place where three women, Shizuka Gozen, Masako Hojo, and her daughter Ohime fought for their love. I think that this land, where the memories of relationships cherished by women in the olden days remain, is a very powerful spot that can give courage to women.”

Masako Hojo fled into the mountains to be with her love Yoritomo. Shizuka Gozen expressed her longing for Yoshitsune through dancing, in front of the shogun who hated him. And Ohime died from a broken heart after her fiancé Kiso Yoshitaka was killed by her father.

I could definitely feel the power of love here. *Maybe I can do that here too...*

“Heh. I like it.” Biina-san whacked Ikanji-kun on the back. “You’re pretty good, Ikanji. That shaved head of yours isn’t just for show!”

“Yeah. Kids who grow up in temples really know their stuff,” Ginga-kun agreed with a nod.

It seemed like everyone was getting along pretty well.

Finally, Yukito-kun was done with his phone call and returned.

“Sorry about that. Chikaze got mad at me ’cuz I guess I didn’t word my text very well.”

“Chikaze-san? Weren’t you texting Yashiro-kun?”

“She was there too, apparently. Anyways, what were you guys talking about?”

“Oh, Ginga-kun and Biina-san want to come with us.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s get going.”

We decided to go to Komachi Street, a popular spot for tourists. We were a group of five people with wildly different tastes and interests. I had a feeling the rest of the trip was going to be really fun.

◇◇◇

After Ginga and Biina joined up with Yuzuki and me at Hachiman-gu, we arrived at Komachi Street. As soon as we got there, Biina said, “Ahh, there’s something we all gotta do together!” We agreed to go along with her first.

“Oh, it looks good on you, Yukito. No wonder you’re a kendo star!”

“I didn’t think I was gonna have to change clothes...”

She made all of us change into Japanese clothes. Apparently the thing she really wanted to do with everyone was rent kimono and walk down Komachi Street together. Biina wore a Taisho schoolgirl-style hakama, while Ginga and Ikanji wore scholar-style hakama. The employee at the rental shop looked at me and said, “Since you’re so fit, you *have* to wear this!” He pressured me into wearing an old-fashioned schoolboy’s cap and overcoat.

“Doesn’t it look like I’m the only one cosplaying?”

“It looks good on you, so who cares? Man, good-looking guys really have it easy.” Ginga was absolutely cracking up, the bastard.

“What’s your theme, Ginga? Riot at a coming-of-age ceremony?”

“That’s not cool, man. I think that fits Biina more than me.”

“Hey, don’t involve me in this! I think likanji looks great, though.”

“Ha ha ha... Well, I’m used to wearing monk’s clothes at home.”

As we bantered back and forth, Yuzuki plodded over. “You look great in that, Yukito-kun. Very cool.”

“Not as great as you, Yuzuki.” She was wearing a red floral furisode, and it looked even better on her than I imagined. She was very feminine in both the way she spoke and her behavior, so in formal Japanese clothing like this she resembled the daughter of some rich noble. Her soft, fluffy hair was short, exposing the nape of her neck from the back. It made her look both ethereal and sexy.

If Kanon and Chikaze were here, they would never shut up about this. They already adored Yuzuki so much, they’d raise a huge fuss if they saw her looking this cute. But since I was the only one of us who got to see it, I felt a bit privileged.

“You look adorable, Yuzuki.”

“R-Really? Th-Thank you so much!” She must have been embarrassed, because her face turned bright red and she hid her face. Every single thing she did was adorable.



Just then, I noticed Biina, Ginga, and Iikanji staring at us. “What is it?”

“I’m pretty sure I saw a statue like this in Atami,” Biina said.

A statue? What the heck is she talking about?

Iikanji clapped his hands, as if he got her point.

“Ohh, she means the statue of Omiya and Kan-Ichi. The Golden Demon.”

“Hmm? What’s that, Iikanji?” Ginga asked.

Iikanji crossed his arms and thought about it. “If I remember correctly, a young man betrayed by his fiancée swayed back and forth between love and revenge...”

“That statue is a man kicking a woman. Isn’t it, like, domestic violence?” Biina interrupted Iikanji.

No, no, that’s definitely not the main point. If Torano-san were here, she’d be able to explain it better since she was on the library committee. Just then, Yuzuki looked at me.

“Do you want to kick me?”

“Of course not!”

Don’t give me a look that says it’s okay to do it just this once!

All four of them burst out laughing at my reaction.

Afterwards, we strolled down Komachi Street in our rented kimono.

“Here you are. Sweet bean paste and black currant cheese flavor.”

“Thank you.” Yuzuki and I each purchased our favorite flavors of thick pancakes at a bakery just off the main street. I got sweet bean paste and she got black currant.

“Ah, that’s right. If you’re going to eat while walking, please keep an eye on the sky,” the store clerk said as she handed us the pancakes.

“The sky? Is it going to rain?” Yuzuki asked.

The store clerk shook her head, saying, “No, that’s not it. The black kites around here like to come after tourists’ food. So if you see any flying up

overhead, keep an eye on your food!”

Sure enough, two black kites circled the sky above us. I’d heard they were a familiar sight in Kita-Kamakura, but actually seeing them was a bit creepy.

“A little while ago, a girl in the same uniform as you had her kamaboko stolen.”

Wow, that person must be a real airhead.

“A kite stole her kamaboko? Sounds like the start of a fairy tale or something.”

“I might laugh if I actually saw it happening.”

While we talked about that, I saw Biina, Ginga, and Iikanji whispering to each other from a little distance away.

“I have a feeling those two...and that’s why...”

“Gotcha. In that case, we should...”

“That’s a good idea... We should leave Sato-dono to it...”

They were too far away for me to hear clearly over the crowd.

They finished their discussion and then came over to us.

“Hey, Yukito. We decided we wanna go somewhere else.”

“Yeah, sorry. We’re out.”

“I have decided to accompany the two of them.”

I guess they wanted to go somewhere else. That must have been what they were discussing.

“Oh, really?”

“I’m sorry. We just now decided. Oh, Sato-san? Can you come here for a sec?”

“Hm? What is it?”

Yuzuki walked over to Biina, who whispered something into her ear. Her face turned bright red.

“What’s wrong, Yuzuki?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing...” she said, but it didn’t seem like nothing. And Biina and the others were grinning for some reason. What in the world was going on?

“Take it easy, you two.”

“See you next time, Sato-chan.”

“Pardon me.”

They all waved with a smile and left.

We were suddenly alone again.

“So, what did Biina say to you?”

“I said, nothing! Come on, let’s go.” Yuzuki started walking ahead of me.

I was about to follow her, but then... “Yuzuki?!”

“Huh?”

I noticed a presence approaching, so I immediately pulled Yuzuki’s hand. Her slender body was even lighter than I expected, and she collapsed into my arms.

And in the next moment, a dark shadow raced past us.

It was a black kite, probably aiming for Yuzuki’s pancake.

“Ooooooh!”

I suddenly heard applause. A group of tourists just happened to witness the scene and started cheering for me. I guess we stood out because we were wearing kimono. But we weren’t putting on a show...

“Are you okay, Yuzuki?”

Yuzuki kept opening and closing her mouth silently as if she couldn’t speak, red-faced. She sure was blushing a lot today. Just then, I realized I was still holding her in my arms. Maybe that was why the tourists had been clapping. I immediately let her go.

“Oops, sorry about that. It just happened so fast.”

“No, thank you very much. You saved me,” Yuzuki said in a tense voice as she held the pancake to her chest.

“That was... Jeez. That was a close one, huh?” I stammered, unsure of what to

say.

“No...that was just a bonus,” she said, but I had no idea what she meant by that.



I was nearly attacked by a black kite, but Yukito-kun had pulled me to safety into his arms with a sudden hug. Because of those two major incidents, it became difficult to stay on Komachi Street. The tourists wouldn't stop grinning at us, and one married couple said, “Ah, to be young and in love...” So we returned our rental clothes and climbed on board the Enoden.

We were able to get seats because the train was empty, but we ended up sitting right next to each other. I felt incredibly sensitive to the feeling of his shoulder touching mine because of what had happened earlier. Also...

It's all because of what Biina-san said...

Before going our separate ways, she had called me over and whispered into my ear. “We're gonna leave you two alone, so go out there and get it done, Sato-chan!”

Get what done?! I understood her intention, at least. They were just trying to be considerate of us. I had told Kanon-san that I would try to get Yukito-kun alone, but now that I had, I was incredibly nervous.

“Hey, Yuzuki?”

“Wh-What?!”

His sudden voice startled me and I yelped in response. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. He smiled at me and continued. “It's almost noon, so why don't we go see the giant Buddha in Hase and then have some lunch?”

“O-Oh, okay. That sounds good.”

“Is there anything in particular you want to eat? I wonder what they have in Hase, anyway.”

“They have shirasu in Kamakura.”

“Seafood, huh? Wonder if they have shrimp curry.”

“I was curious about a restaurant in Kita-Kamakura.”

As we chatted about our plans for lunch, the train arrived at Hase, three stations away from Kamakura Station.

First, we walked towards Kotoku-in where the Great Buddha was located.

“I saw the Great Buddha when I was in elementary school, but this road hasn’t changed much.”

“Oh? There wasn’t a sign like this before, right?” I pointed to a nearby tsunami evacuation map.

Yukito-kun tilted his head to the side. “I’m not sure. I guess it’s dangerous to be here in case of a tsunami.”

“The Great Buddha used to be indoors, but then the temple was washed away by the tsunami.”

“Then it’s dangerous even around the Great Buddha. It seems better to escape to the mountains.”

Just then, we arrived near Kotoku-in.

“Hmm? What’s this store?” Yukito-kun stopped in front of a shop. There was a sign that said “Sankaido” and it looked like a souvenir shop... *Huh?*

Wh-What’s the deal with this shop?

Even though it claimed to be a souvenir shop, there were weapons that seemed to be replicas. I knew it was popular for boys to buy wooden swords at souvenir shops in places like Kyoto or Toyako, but here there were wooden swords, fake metal swords, shuriken, western swords, and even spears.

Of course, they were all replicas, but you would definitely get in trouble for walking around with them. Why were they selling these things? This shop seemed like a really strange place.

“Whoa, there’s even an iron fan. Should I buy it?” Yukito-kun’s eyes sparkled as he ogled the various weapons.

I was surprised by his reaction. He was known as the class leader, had a great personality, was good-looking, popular with girls, and athletic. And yet right

now, he just looked like your average teenage boy who was obsessed with weapons.

“Um, what are you going to do with it, Yukito-kun?” I asked, half-confused and half-dumbfounded.

He grinned at me. “If I learn how to use it, it might come in handy someday.”

“When would you ever have to use an iron fan...?”

“You can never be too prepared. There might be times when you don’t have a bamboo sword at hand.”

Oh, right. He’s in the kendo club. Still, I wasn’t sure why he’d want an iron fan instead of a bamboo sword. “Do you like these kinds of weapons?”

“Yeah. They make me feel strangely excited. I really wanna learn how to use it.” He flashed me a mischievous smile as he toyed with a kunai. “I want to be a guy who can fight for someone in case of an emergency. That’s why I joined the kendo club, trained my body, and learned fighting techniques.”

“Are you saying you want to be a hero?”

“Not exactly. I really admire old-fashioned heroes, though.” Saying that, Yukito-kun grabbed a wooden sword and took a straight stance. “I want to be a hero who can protect someone and fight against evil. Isn’t that difficult these days? In movies nowadays, the main characters are always hesitant about whether or not they want to fight, or they struggle to protect the person they hold dear. The writers worry too much about how the story will be received by feminists, so the male characters end up looking like idiots to make the female characters look stronger.”

“Oh yeah! I’ve noticed that too!” I said, nodding. “And the same goes for women. If you want to be like a princess, you might be prone to danger. But if you just wait for a man to help you, you could be called pathetic for being too dependent. I guess it’s just because of how hard women have had to fight to get the rights we have today.”

“Oh, I don’t mean to discredit that at all.” He scratched his head, choosing his words carefully. “But I don’t think it’s possible to deny a man who wants to be a hero and protect others, or a woman who wants to be a beautiful princess and

be saved by a prince. If a guy wants to work hard to be strong and a woman wants to be beautiful, or vice versa, what's wrong with that? I think it's a great thing."

"That's right... If you stand on one side and completely deny the other, you'll end up just replacing one with the other. But..." I felt a little embarrassed to say it, but I decided to be honest. "I also kind of have a wish to be a princess. So...when you, you know...saved me...I was r-really happy..."

I trailed off quietly at the end and Yukito-kun smiled at me. "It made me happy that I could be all cool and save the day."

"And you're humble too! Ha ha. Seriously though, you were really cool..."

"Anyway, who cares if it's outdated, right? If that's okay with us, then we don't have to care what other people think."

"Hee hee. You sound like Yashiro-kun."

"Ha ha ha, you're right!"

As we laughed together, the mood between us felt really peaceful and calm. I thought things were going great. All of a sudden, Yukito-kun pointed to a display case and spoke to the old man who worked at the shop.

"Excuse me. I'd like to buy this iron fan."

"You're going to get it after all?" *Honestly! But...I feel like I've become closer to Yukito-kun than I was before.*

I felt warm as I watched him talk to the shopkeeper.

A little while later, Yukito-kun came back after buying the fan.

"Hm? Yukito and Yuzuki?"

"Oh hey, you're right!"

All of a sudden, Chikaze-san and Yashiro-kun approached us from the road next to Kotoku-in. I wondered why the two of them were together, but they told us they happened to meet on the mountain trail. What was that all about?

In any case, since we'd run into each other, we decided to eat lunch together. Yashiro-kun said he didn't mind, so it was decided. We talked about it and

ended up going to a seafood restaurant.

“We sure met up with a lot of people today, huh?” Yukito-kun said.

I answered him with a smile. “Yep. It was really fun, though.”

Chapter Four Part D: A Trip through Kamakura (Chikaze's POV)

It was just past 10:15 a.m. on the Shonan-Shinjuku line. After saying goodbye to everyone, Kanon and I went back to Kita-Kamakura Station and took the train to Kamakura Station.

Being only one station away, it shouldn't have been that far to walk. But Kanon wanted to go to Komachi Street, so we ended up skipping Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu. Still, I was planning on exercising later anyways. I would just save my energy for now.

"Hee hee hee, I can't wait. I heard you can eat all kinds of yummy things on Komachi Street. Autumn flavors. Local ingredients. Seasonal sweets. Mwa ha ha!" She had a grin on her face as she imagined all the delicious food. She'd really gotten into walking around by herself while sampling various foods, and now her gluttony was being pushed even further. You know what they say: dumplings over flowers.

"You'll get fat if you don't watch yourself, you know."

"I have no limits today! We came all this way for our trip. Plus, I saved up my allowance and prepared about three extra stomachs just for this occasion."

"Are you a cow?" Cows had four stomachs, right? Honestly, what was I going to do with her? I sighed and looked out at the scenery of Kamakura whizzing past us.

Didn't Yashiro say he and Torano-san were gonna visit a temple somewhere?

Every time I saw that temple outside the window, I wondered if the two of them were inside, having a good time praying together somewhere.

This feels so weird.

Kanon was probably curious how I felt about Yashiro, but I honestly wasn't sure myself. When I'd heard that Torano-san was his girlfriend, I liked him

enough to feel disappointed, but not enough to think “Maybe if they don’t have a good relationship, I can slip in somewhere.” In other words, it wasn’t a predatory kind of love.

I think Kanon’s already made peace with it, though.

It seemed like her interest was now directed at Torano-san. If I had the chance to talk with Torano-san, would I have a change of heart too? I felt an uneasiness inside of me as the train pulled into Kamakura station.

We’d finally arrived at Komachi Street. It was packed with tourists even on a weekday; that was how much of a tourist spot it was. There was a big store near my high school, but you only had to go a few blocks away to find nothing but shuttered stores, so it was kind of fun to be somewhere with so much activity.

“Excuse me! Please give me one of these meat kebabs.” Kanon had already gotten right down to business. This seemed to be a store that sold Kamakura-brand beef. The meat sushi looked delicious but expensive, but there were also reasonably priced foods such as deep-fried cutlets. Kanon ordered a meat kebab. It was cheap and looked easy to eat, but I couldn’t believe she was having deep-fried food so early in the morning.

When I said that to her, she gave me a look. “Then why are you ordering one too, Chi-chan?” She pointed to the clerk who was preparing my own meat kebab. What could I say? When I saw people eating something, I wanted to try it too.

“I-I’ll be fine. I’ll exercise after this.”

“Oooh reaaally?” She smirked at me.

Just then the clerk came out. “Here you go— Oh!” She handed me the kebab, but suddenly looked up at the sky. Her eyes warily darted around for a while before she let out a sigh of relief. What the heck was that about?

“Um, is there something wrong?” I asked.

The clerk waved her hand in a flustered manner. “Ah, I’m sorry. Just be careful of the sky when you walk around with food. I don’t see any right now, so it should be fine, but...”

“Okay...” Kanon and I both said in confusion. Neither of us had any idea what she meant. But if she said everything was fine, then I guess it didn’t matter...?

Moving on from that, Kanon and I left the store and resumed our stroll down Komachi Street.

Kanon would soon find out what the clerk’s warnings had been about, but that was a different story.

After we finished exploring Komachi Street, which was a journey filled with highs and lows, we parted ways after crossing the railroad crossing next to Kamakura Station. Kanon wanted to go somewhere via the Enoden, and I planned to go from Zeniarai Benzaiten to the hiking course that would take me to the giant Buddha.

“The next time I see you will be at Hasedera, right? You’re going on a mountain trail, aren’t you? Be careful,” Kanon said.

I was more worried about her overeating. She’d already eaten so many things, and I figured she was planning on having even more after this. I tried to caution her one more time, but she just pouted and said, “Excuse you! I have *other* plans besides eating, you know.”

I wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth, but at any rate, it was time to go our separate ways.

“See ya!”

We gave each other a high five, then started walking in our respective directions. *All right, time to take it easy!*

I walked alone on a back road. I could go anywhere and do anything I wanted. It was only recently that I had learned how to enjoy time like this.

When I was with my friends, I used to either go along with what they wanted to do or have them all go along with my decision. I assumed that was the way to maintain a smooth friendship, but now I knew that there were other ways to get along with people. You could have a bond with people that continued unbroken, even when you were far away or each doing different things that you each loved. It was a bond that I believed wouldn’t be broken.

Kanon and I might be apart right now, but I knew we would meet up again later. That kind of assurance felt like a much stronger bond than a connection people had to force to maintain.

Just then, a shop caught my eye.

“Is that...a katana?” I wondered aloud as I saw a Japanese sword being displayed in the window. The sign read “Masamune.” *There’s a katana called the Masamune, right? I guess this is where they sell them.*

It had been a long time since women’s hobbies began to include going to look at katanas and making pilgrimages to sacred places due to the influence of games, but I’d never gotten into that. The only reason I knew about the Masamune was because it often showed up in shonen manga.

I bet Yukito would love a shop like this.

Perhaps because he was in the kendo club, Yukito was pretty familiar with Japanese swords. He’d even said before that he liked them so much, he played those fighting games that were aimed towards women. I also wasn’t particularly interested in those.

Maybe he can recommend some games to Yuzuki so they can share a hobby...

Thinking about that, I smiled and left the storefront. Somehow, I felt like I’d expanded my horizons since I started doing more things alone. When I was walking with someone, I tended to be so absorbed in chatting with them that I didn’t notice the scenery around me. But when you’re alone, you start to notice details in your surroundings that you might have overlooked. Still, I found myself wanting to tell people about all the things I’d seen.

It was a strange feeling, going back and forth between being alone and being in a group.

I passed through a residential area and gradually drew closer to the mountains. If someone asked me what I wanted to talk about right now, this scenery would be it.

I was right to come here alone instead of with Kanon.

Apparently, Zeniarai Benzaiten was farther from Kamakura station than I

thought. The terrain was very hilly, and there was even a short tunnel that cut right through a mountain.

The moderate darkness and dampness of the tunnel felt like a whole other world. I liked it, but Kanon would hate coming along and having to walk so much. I wondered if she realized that she'd turn into a blob if she kept eating all that food without exercising. How could she not know that?

As I continued to worry, I arrived at a slope on the edge of the mountain.

I think it's on the middle of this hill.

I'd once been to Zeniarai Benten in Kamakura during an elementary school trip, but strangely it didn't leave much of an impression on me.

Speaking of famous places in Kamakura, after Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu Shrine and the Great Buddha, next was Zeniarai Benzaiten, but I didn't remember what it was like. I wasn't sure if I had just been too little to remember, or if I simply hadn't been interested enough to care because it was for school. Maybe both?

But right now, I was looking forward to it.

I steadily climbed a fairly steep slope. As I climbed, I began to see a torii in front of a cave in the mountainside. Next to it was a large stone monument engraved with the words "Zeniarai Benzaiten Ugafuku Shrine."

So this place is called Ugafuku Shrine, huh? I had no idea until now. I thought it was just called Benten Shrine or something like that.

At any rate, I took a quick picture of the area near the entrance with my phone, then passed through the torii and proceeded into the cave. Was the ceiling really this low the last time I came here? I guess I hadn't noticed it because I was just a kid back then.

After I passed through the cave, I was greeted by another set of torii.

This place reminded me of Kyoto, except they weren't painted red. I passed through the gates and arrived at an area filled with greenery. It really felt like this shrine was built right into the side of a mountain.

Was this shrine always like a hidden village or a secret base?

Ponds and waterfalls only added to the feeling of being in a secret place. I

wondered why I didn't remember seeing all this back then.

There were several shrines around here, and I didn't know where to start. *Times like these are when modern technology comes in handy!* I took out my phone and searched "How to visit the Zeniarai Benten shrine."

Hmm, I see. You can go to the shrine office to receive a colander, a candle, and an incense stick. Then you go around to the five shrines counterclockwise. It says here "Serious patrons can also offer an egg." ...An egg?

Apparently there was a god here related to snakes, so it was good to dedicate an egg. Well, I could do that next time.

I went ahead and bought incense sticks and the other items at the shrine office, then went to deliver candles to each shrine. Some shrines were located next to waterfalls, while others were built in ponds. There were many shrines that were each rather mysterious. I went around to them all in order before offering incense at the main shrine. Finally, I arrived at the cave in the very back of the temple grounds.

Ah, I may remember this one.

It was a cave with flowing water. I think I might have gone straight here without looking at the other shrines in elementary school. This was the place where you could wash your coins. That's why this place was called Zeniarai—literally "washing coins."

I offered a candle, then put coins from my wallet into the colander and washed them. Some people also washed cash, but I didn't have the courage to do so.

I dried the coins off with a towel and returned them to my wallet. There was a sign that said this cleaned money should be spent wisely and meaningfully. That was true.

After visiting the shrine, I relaxed at the rest area and enjoyed the view.

Ah, the breeze feels so nice. Oh, there's someone buying eggs. So that's where you get them from. Maybe I should've gone ahead and gotten some too. Well, I'm sure I'll be back. I can just do it then. Oh, a group of elementary school kids... Maybe they're on a field trip too... I wonder if they'll forget all about it like I

did...

I just sat there, absently thinking to myself.

I really liked moments like these. Spending time with my friends was fun too, but when I was alone I could really savor this time. I could just lose myself in my own little world.

That kind of sounds narcissistic, I thought to myself with a sneer.

Well, guess I'll go now.

I headed back through the cave and went up the slope instead of down, towards the hiking path that led towards the giant Buddha. I took the path that the sign indicated, and then I arrived at a fork in the road. One path led to the giant Buddha, the other to Genjiyama Park.

"Huh? Yashiro?"

"Ido-san?"

That's when I bumped into Yashiro.

Apparently he and Torano-san had gone their separate ways too. Yashiro was the one who taught me it was okay to do your own thing and join up with the others later, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see him taking his own advice.

He told me he was also planning on taking the hiking trail to the giant Buddha. I guess that was in line with his interest in riding sports bikes. The two hobbies did seem to overlap.

I wonder if he wants to be alone, though.

If he didn't bring Torano-san with him, maybe he wouldn't want to go with me either.

"If you're headed in the same direction, maybe I'll get a late start," I suggested, thinking I was being considerate.

"Huh? Why?" he asked with a serious look on his face. *That's what I wanna know!*

Then Yashiro started complaining about the dangers of mountain roads. Long

story short, he said “I feel lonely walking the mountain road alone, so why don’t we go together?” Why didn’t he just say that from the beginning? That said, I’d come here alone because I didn’t have anyone else to go hiking with in the first place. I’d honestly feel more at ease if Yashiro came with me.

Right after I said, “Let’s go,” Yukito sent me a message that caused a bit of trouble, but all in all it wasn’t a big deal.

Yashiro and I all started walking down the asphalt road leading to the giant Buddha.

“Hey, Yashiro?” I said to him. He was walking just ahead of me, so he turned his face around to look at me.



“Hm? What?”

“You know how we were talking about how the mountain is dangerous? Is this something that can’t be enjoyed alone?”

During breaks, Yashiro and I would debate whether certain activities could be enjoyed in a group but not alone.

After the school caste system had collapsed, people who were alone were seen as strong individuals who had their own identity, and people who were always with others were seen as weak and unable to survive on their own. I was sure that there had to be something you could enjoy in a group but not alone.

That’s why Yashiro said he’s more comfortable being alone than with others (not counting the time he spends with his girlfriend, Torano-san, of course). I was determined to make him admit that there was something that could only be enjoyed in a group. I knew one wasn’t better than the other, but I hated to quit a game I started, so I kept on going with it.

“Walking in the mountains with someone else is more reassuring than walking alone, isn’t it?”

“Hmm... I don’t know.” He was thinking deeply about my words. I would normally be countered immediately, so I wondered if that meant he thought I was onto something here.

Then Yashiro scratched his head. “Like I said before, there are things you probably shouldn’t do alone, but that doesn’t mean you can’t still enjoy it alone anyways. Take diving, for example.”

“What, like scuba diving?”

“Yeah, that. What’s that called...the buddy system? Anyway, they recommend that you take someone else with you to reduce the danger, but that doesn’t mean you wouldn’t have fun just going alone, right? Going by yourself instead of with someone else doesn’t change the scenery underwater. I’m sure that diving alone would be fun, but it’s too dangerous.”

“Oh, I guess that’s true...” If anything happened, you’d have to take care of it yourself. But most people don’t have the confidence to do something risky like

that. It's reassuring to know that someone else is there, just in case.

"And it's the same for hiking in the mountains, right? I feel safer because you're here with me, Ido-san. I know I can rely on you if something goes wrong."

"Y-Yeah?" I was shocked to hear that he thought I was reliable. *Wow, he trusts me! Hey, wait a minute—don't get my hopes up with those compliments!*

As we continued walking, the asphalt ended and the path became bare dirt covered in fallen leaves. There were some stairs here and there for us to sit and take breaks, but for the most part the path was muddy and hard to navigate. It was a pretty rough trail.

"It was like this from Kita-Kamakura to Mt. Genji," Yashiro said.

Oh, really? "Well, this is more like a real hike, isn't it?"

"More like mountain climbing!"

He had a point; the difference in elevation fluctuated so much, you could definitely hurt your knees if you weren't careful. Occasionally lending him a hand and being helped in turn, we descended down the dangerous path.

Just then, I got a text. "Hey, Yashiro? Can you hang on a sec?"

"Sure."

I took my phone out of my pocket and saw that the message was from Kanon.

KANON: omg guess what!

KANON: I met up with torano-san at the kamakura station!

KANON: and we're gonna stay together till we all meet up later! we're gonna be such good friends after this!!!

Jeez, she certainly sounded excited. I looked at the picture she sent along with the unnecessarily excited message, and it did look like she was walking on a road behind Torano-san somewhere. When I talked to Yukito on the phone earlier, he'd said that Torano-san had just been to Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu.

She must've headed to Kamakura Station right after that and joined up with Kanon.

And since I had paired with Yashiro-kun, we'd essentially gone from enjoying the trip solo to swapping partners.

I wonder how she'd react if I told her I was with Yashiro right now.

Kanon was with Torano-san right now. If I texted her saying "I'm with Yashiro right now," I just knew she would show the message to Torano-san. I wonder how she'd react. I pictured her with a very unpleasant look on her face.

I doubted she'd think he was cheating on her, but would she still feel a little betrayed? Maybe her face would be full of shock.

And it wouldn't be like her to confront me and say "You boyfriend stealer!" or something. What would I do if she got tears in her eyes and said, "Please don't take him away from me!" Hm, yeah...that one suits her more. It's kinda cute.

When I snickered at that thought, Yashiro tilted his head. "What is it?"

"It's nothing. Let's go." I brushed it off and started walking again.

I didn't want to make waves, so I'd just wait to tell them until we were all together.

"Phew... Phew..."

"Haa... Haa..."

As we continued walking, we started talking less and panting more. Even though it was November, I was sweating profusely. The hiking trail to the giant Buddha was more mountainous than I expected.

There were places with rugged rocks piled up, and even sections where ropes were tied to pegs stuck in the rocks for people to grab on to so they didn't fall.

It was probably fine if you could take your time and enjoy the scenery, but this didn't seem like the ideal time for a casual walk while on a field trip. Knowing I had to get to Hase at a certain time and eat lunch made me feel hurried. It felt like I was trying to beat a record here or something.

“Are you tired, Ido-san?”

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“I’m fine, but let’s take a break. We’ll get there early at this rate anyway,” Yashiro said as he checked his phone.

We’d been so absorbed in walking, we were actually progressing a lot faster than I thought we would. We’d end up having to kill time around Hase until the meeting, so we decided to take a break in a slightly open area.

Although it was more open here, the surroundings were gloomy and the view was disappointing. But at least you could sit on a rock or tree trunk to take a rest.

Then Yashiro took out a thermos from his bag.

“Want some tea?” he asked, holding the cup out to me.

“I brought a sports drink. It’s one I bought along the way. Why’d you bring a thermos, anyway?”

“I thought it would be better to have something warm to drink.”

“Oh.”

I was drenched in sweat until a while ago, but when I stopped, the autumn breeze was cool. It felt like it wouldn’t take long for me to cool down, so maybe it would be a better idea to drink something warm.

“Sure, I’ll have some.”

“Here ya go.”

He poured some tea in the cup for me. *Huh? But how’s he gonna drink?* I wondered if he was just going to drink after me from the same cup, but then I saw there was another white cup attached to the thermos.

Oh, it has double lids. Mm, this is delicious.

I took a sip, and the wonderful scent of the tea relaxed me.

“It’s delicious. It tastes like it’s store-bought!” I said.

He laughed. “That’s because it is.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, I got it at the hot drink bar in the convenience store on the way here.”

“You went to all the effort of bringing a thermos but cut corners there?”

No wonder it's so good, I thought as I sipped the tea.

As I breathed out a sigh, the wind that flowed high above my head shook the trees. The view here might have been bad, but the sounds were pleasant.

“This really is like mountain climbing. I’m glad I didn’t bring Kanon along with me,” I said.

Yashiro nodded. “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing about Nue. She would’ve tried to keep up with me if she’d come along. I wouldn’t have wanted her to overdo it,” he said with his arms crossed.

She was definitely more of a bookworm and didn’t seem the type to like hiking in the mountains. Come to think of it, Yashiro and Torano-san didn’t have much in common besides preferring being alone and liking books. Their personalities and athletic abilities were pretty different.

Yashiro was caring and Torano-san was shy and thoughtful. He liked physical activity while she liked to quietly read books. They both gave priority to what the other wanted to do, to the point where they did activities alone.

“Hey, Yashiro. Can I ask you something?”

“Hm? What?”

“Uh...don’t you think it would be nice if you and Torano-san shared the same hobbies? You could go mountain climbing together like this...”

For example, if I were his girlfriend, I’d be able to go along with him mountain climbing or cycling or... *Oops, wait—I don’t think this train of thought is headed in a very good direction.*

“Hm...” He gave it some thought before answering. “I do think that sometimes, but...”

“Y-You do?”

“But Nue being that way is part of what makes her cute to me. She’s shy and

unsociable, and she's also curious and not good at sports. She likes visiting old bookstores in Jimbocho. If she were to suddenly become sporty and active, I think that would be kind of weird."

Wow, he's really gushing about her. There really was a big difference, though. "Despite all that, she's the one you want to be with, huh?"

"Yep. Obviously it'd be great to share the same hobbies with the one you love, but they're their own person, you know? So there will always be differences between you. If you get your hopes up too much about being compatible, you'll start worrying too much about slight differences."

"Yeah..."

I guess I could see that. The more you expect out of someone, the greater your disappointment when they don't meet them.

Yashiro looked up, his expression softening.

"There will always be people you don't get along with no matter what. People who just don't understand each other. But if the differences are so small that you can overlook them, I think that's actually kind of fun. Then you can introduce each other to new things."

I wasn't even sure what to say. Looking back on it, it was true that the reason I started to care about Yashiro was because he made me break out of my rigid mindset. And I'm sure the same goes for Kanon too. By interacting with Yashiro, who was used to being alone, I felt like a lot of stress and tension I'd held inside of me had been released.

I already knew that it was more important to enjoy differences between people than to have similar tastes.

"And Torano-san does that for you too?"

"Yeah, I guess she does," he said shyly, scratching his cheek.

There's no sense in denying it anymore. I just gotta admit it.

I was in love with Yashiro. And right at that moment, I'd been totally rejected.

Yashiro and I could be friends, or even best friends, but we couldn't be more than that.

Because if I tried to go any further than that, we'd end up fighting and it would ruin our friendship. Knowing myself, I'd try to force it on him and have my way.

There were things that Torano-san could accept that I knew I couldn't, and I was sure it was the same for Yashiro. Now I really understood.

I glanced at Yashiro's face. "Is something the matter?"

"No. It's nothing."

"Okay...?"

The best relationship between Yashiro and me was probably just good friends who could depend on each other. Yashiro cherished Torano-san, and I would find someone to fall in love with and cherish them too. If they ever got into fights, I could be a mediator, and when I wanted to complain about my future boyfriend, I could ask Yashiro and Torano-san for advice.

Yeah, I felt like that was way more fitting.

"Um, Ido-san?" Yashiro gave me a suspicious look. I had been sitting there smiling and laughing at the various things I was imagining.

"Heh heh. It's nothing," I said.

After that, we resumed hiking. Maybe it was because the uncertainty inside of me had finally been cleared up, but I felt like my steps were lighter now. We continued walking for a while until we reached the side of a main road. We were right behind Kotoku-in Temple where the giant Buddha was located. This seemed to be the end of the hiking trail.

After passing through the dense forest, I felt refreshed. It was a little past noon, with two hours until our meeting time, so there was plenty of time to see the giant Buddha or go eat lunch somewhere.

I wondered if Kanon and Torano-san were having lunch together somewhere right now.

"Oh, right." I thought of something and took out my phone. I turned my back on Yashiro, then put the camera into selfie mode and snapped a picture.

Perfect. He showed up in the pic.

I opened the message app and typed a message to Kanon's address.

CHIKAZE: i met up with yashiro too. we're about to have lunch

I attached the photo I just took. That should do it.

"Hm? What's up?" He turned around and looked at me. I couldn't help but grin.

"Just a little prank," I said.

"Prank?"

Yep, just a little joke.

Torano-san was with Kanon right now, so I knew if I sent that text she would show it to Torano-san. What kind of face would she make once she saw it? If she seemed concerned, I'd just tell her "Don't worry. I won't take him away from you."

I doubt she'd keep such an unpleasant look on her face after that. Kanon and I would tease her, and then her face would turn bright red. Yuzuki would stick up for her and scold us, then Yashiro would warn us not to tease her so much.

I could easily imagine it all.

Yashiro had a puzzled look on his face, but I gave him a big smile. "It's nothing. Let's go."

I walked past him and he followed after me, still looking confused. Maybe this kind of relationship wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Huh? Yukito and Yuzuki?"

We came across a suspicious souvenir shop (it was some weird place that sold replicas of weapons) where we ended up running into Yukito and Yuzuki. Apparently the two of them had met up with all kinds of people at Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu.

Yuzuki seemed to be having a good time, so I guess so far it had been a successful trip.

After looking around the souvenir shop, we all decided to go eat fresh shirasu bowls. The four of us went to a place along the road.

For some reason, you ordered outside the store and then waited in the dining space inside. As we waited for our food to be ready (you could choose a raw shirasu bowl topped with either salmon or tuna), we sat at a table and talked about what we had been up to all morning.

“Hey, Yukito. There was a sword shop near Kamakura Station with a sign that said ‘Masamune’ on it!”

“Seriously?! I forgot all about that... I wanted to go check it out.”

“Heh heh. You really like weapons, Yukito-kun.”

“Oh, come to think of it, your eyes were shining at the souvenir shop just now.”

“Hey, now. Any man would get excited over that. Right, Yashiro?”

“Don’t get me involved...”

“Then did you get excited at the souvenir shop at all?”

“I mean, I know how you feel...” The reluctant look on Yashiro’s face was so hilarious, we all started laughing.

“So what about you two? Were the mountains of Kamakura beautiful?”

“Hmm... I couldn’t see much of the scenery in the distance because there were only trees. But the mountain trail was really rugged. It was fun.”

“That’s right. I’m glad I wore my gym clothes today. It would’ve been a nightmare if I’d been wearing my uniform and leather loafers!”

“Hm, that sounds interesting. Maybe I should try it sometime,” Yukito commented.

“I...might not be able to keep up.”

“Heh heh. Don’t worry, Yuzuki. You can just take it easy and go slow,” I said.

She blinked at me. I wondered if I'd said something weird, but then she giggled. "For some reason you look like you're in a much better mood than when I saw you this morning, Chikaze-san."

"Huh? I do?"

I touched my face. Did I look that different?

"What's this? Did you become enlightened by walking on the mountain path?" Yukito teased.

"Shut up," I said, giggling. "I am in a better mood though. It's like all the uncertainty I felt inside of me is gone."

"Uncertainty? Did you have something on your mind?"

"Heh heh. That's a secret."

"What? Tell me!" Yuzuki said, but I pinched her nose to make her shut up as we bantered back and forth. Just then, the clerk said our food was ready. We all went to go get our shirasu bowls and then returned to our seats.

"Ooh, you got salmon on yours, Yashiro? Lemme have a bite!"

"Eat your own."

"Aw, c'mon. I'll give you a piece of my tuna?"

I traded with a reluctant Yashiro, but he'd stopped complaining so it must've been okay.

Seeing our exchange, Yuzuki blinked her eyes again.

"You two sure are getting along well."

"No, I don't think so..." Yashiro looked at me with a questioning look on his face.

"Yeah. We're the same as before," I said with a grin.

"Really?"

"Yes. We just figured out the best distance to keep between us."

This would probably be the best thing for our relationship. Someday, I'd find someone special too. And then I'd look back on it and say, "I had a huge crush

on you back then!” and enjoy Yashiro and Torano-san’s flustered reactions. All I could do now was look forward to that day.

Chapter Four Part E: A Trip through Kamakura (Nue's POV)

It was just past 10 a.m., near Tokei-ji, during our field trip to Kamakura.

Hachijo-kun and I parted ways with Hanamizawa-san's group after visiting Engaku-ji. We'd promised to meet up with each other at 2 p.m., but we were free to do whatever we wanted until then.

The other four seemed to be heading towards Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu, but I had told Hachijo-kun in advance that there was a place nearby that I wanted to check out.

It was only a minute or so away from Kita-Kamakura Station along the railroad tracks. Hachijo-kun and I walked side by side as we arrived at Tokei-ji, in front of the main gate.

"Nue, are you okay here?"

"Yes..."

Tokei-ji was a temple founded by the wife of Hojo Tokimune, in an era when it was not easy for wives to ask their husbands for a divorce. She had made it into a nunnery, and used it as a refuge for women to cut ties with their husbands.

It was also known as the hydrangea temple, but was probably better known as the setting of the famous song "Break-Up Temple" when Masashi Sada was active in Grape.

As a lover of Showa-era songs, I'd always wanted to see this scenery at least once.

"Should I start crying in front of this gate?"

"Please don't," Hachijo-kun said seriously. "If you act out the song, that means you'll dump me."

Oh, that's right. The man gets dumped in the third verse. His lover had

lamented “If you cut ties with me I won’t be able to live,” and yet she had left him in the end. I chuckled at Hachijo-kun’s reaction.

“But... I didn’t come from Mt. Genji. I came from Kita-Kamakura.”

“Fate won’t be reversed if you come from the other route.”

“If you turn backwards, the dead will come back to life, right?”

“No, no. That’s from a horror novel about going the reverse route on a pilgrimage.” Hachijo-kun could always understand my obscure references.

Actually, it was said that you’d get three times the reward if you went the reverse route on a pilgrimage. That’s because if you do that, you’ll have a higher chance of meeting Kukai, who has become immortal and is still making pilgrimage tours in numerical order.

Kukai must have strong legs.

Just then, Hachijo-kun pointed towards the main gate. “So, do you want to make a visit? It’s not hydrangea season, though.”

“No.” I shook my head. I pointed to the stairs leading to the main gate...and the path extending from the left side. There was a unique little coffee shop ahead.

I decided to muster up a little courage. “Um...there’s a café underneath Tokei-ji that got famous because of that ‘Break-up Temple’ song... It’s supposed to be really nice...and good for couples to sit and talk. I’m kind of interested in checking it out.” I was too embarrassed to look him in the eyes as I spoke. “I was thinking it’d be nice to go there together.”

I glanced up at him. His face was bright red. He then had a look of panic, as if he had just come back to himself and realized he needed to answer.

After carefully choosing his words, he put his hand on his forehead and gave a weak smile. “I’m sorry. All I can think of to say is ‘I’d love to!’ I wish I could give you a better response, but that’s all I can come up with.”

“Don’t worry about it...”

As long as he was happy to have tea with me, that was enough. Seeing Hachijo-kun’s embarrassed expression made me giggle again.

“Welcome! Go ahead and sit wherever you like,” a café worker said as we walked inside. It was a little dark, but the interior had a nice, relaxing atmosphere. It looked like we were the only customers at that time, so we could pick anywhere we wanted.

We decided on a table by the window in the back. The back three walls of the café were all windows, so the view there was beautiful and much brighter than near the entrance.

“This place has a really nice vibe,” Hachijo-kun said as he looked out the window. There was a bamboo fence outside, with plants like bamboo grass planted in front of it. The greenery of Kita-Kamakura’s mountains spread out beyond the fence, creating an incredible view.

Hachijo-kun looked at me and smiled. “Don’t you get a *wabi-sabi* feel in here?”

“Do you even understand what that phrase means and how you’re supposed to use it?”

“Not really.”

“Thought so.”

As we exchanged small talk, the waitress brought over a menu to our table. Hachijo-kun and I shared it, looking over the selection together. It looked like this café’s specialty was fruit cake with raisins, and the drinks were all made to complement it.

“I think I’ll have a fruit cake set with iced coffee.”

“You don’t like bitter coffee, do you?”

“I don’t. I’m going to add a lot of milk and sugar.”

“That’s basically café au lait. I’ll have a café latte,” Hachijo-kun said, then called the waitress back over to take our orders.

“Would you like to add whipped cream to the cake?” she asked.

“Well, Nue?”

“Yes, please.”

“Coming right up.” The waitress bowed and left.

I was still a bit nervous about talking to other people like that. I wasn’t sure if the aloof appearance of my face hid it or not. *I wish I were more expressive.* I pinched my cheek and started pulling on it.

Just then, Hachijo-kun and I made eye contact. Embarrassed, I let go of my cheek. He stifled a laugh. He knew he shouldn’t be laughing right now, but he could barely hold it in.

“I think it’s cute when you’re worried about being unfriendly.”

I could feel my ears getting hot. I was so embarrassed, I stomped on his foot beneath the table. Even though he was wearing his leather loafers, he just grinned back at me.

“Here you are,” the waitress said, carrying over our orders.

She set down two plates with dark brown fruit cakes, an iced coffee in a goblet-shaped glass, some small pots of milk and sugar, and finally Hachijo-kun’s latte.

“Take your time,” she said, and then left.

“This is amazing,” Hachijo-kun said, staring at my glass of iced coffee. It did look like a wine glass, but it was about as big as a parfait. He held out his palm and moved it around. “If you swirled it around like this, you’d look like some kind of ruler.”

“I am not doing that.”

“But I want to take a picture of Queen Nue...”

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned. He genuinely looked disappointed.

I would die of embarrassment if someone took a picture of me like that. I would die a shameful death. And I didn’t want that dark stain on my past. I brushed those thoughts away by cutting into the fruit cake, dipping it in whipped cream, and taking a bite.

“Oh!” It was sweet and delicious. The flavor of fragrant brandy gave it a

mature taste. It may have been bitter on its own, but the rich sweetness of whipped cream made up for it.

When I tasted it, I imagined a little girl dressed up like an adult.

The clerk had asked me if I wanted whipped cream, but I thought it was a must for this cake. As I basked in the flavor, I noticed Hachijo-kun looking at me while drinking his latte.

“Nue...you look really happy when you eat something sweet.”

Hearing that, my ears became hot again. I didn't think my aloofness could hide that. *Honestly, Hachijo-kun.* He was still grinning at me. I was frustrated that I kept getting embarrassed like this. *All right.*

Having made up my mind, I pierced the cake with a fork, dabbed it with cream, and pointed it towards him. Now it was his turn to pay.

“Eh... Um... Nue?”

“Say ahhh!” I said flatly.

He froze. He definitely knew what I meant. And how he was supposed to respond. But he was completely paralyzed from the shock of seeing me act like this.

“Open up!” I demanded.

“Agh...” *Chomp.* He relented and ate the bite of cake.

I was satisfied with the look on his face as he chewed. “How does it taste?”

“It might be a little too sweet for me,” he replied. I couldn't help but smile.

My boyfriend, Hachijo-kun, or Shigeaki Yashiro. I loved him. We both liked books, but we weren't completely the same. I liked quiet time, and he liked exercise. And if you respect your partner's hobbies instead of forcing them to do what you wanted, you would inevitably spend time apart.

“See you later.”

“Yeah. See you later.”

I'll say goodbye for now. We aren't cutting ties.

I stood in front of a retro-looking mailbox by the railroad crossing near Jochiji. From here, Hachijo-kun and I would go our separate ways for a while.

He headed south towards the mountain trail, while I would head east and first aim for Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu. We'd meet up again at the Hase temple with everyone else.

I miss that person who stepped through the white snow of Mt. Yoshino and went deep into the mountain.

A waka poem with some connection to Kamakura came to mind. But that poem made it seem like an eternal farewell... So instead...

Though a swift stream

By a rock met and restrained in impetuous flow

Divided, it speeds on, and at last unites again.

Yes, that one was better. I knew we would meet again. I felt the corners of my mouth lift a little as I began to walk.

A road between mountains. Whenever I saw Kamakura on TV, they usually featured bustling and gorgeous places such as Komachi Street and Kaigan-dori. But when I thought of Kamakura, I imagined it more as an ancient capital, like in Kita-Kamakura.

The greenery of the hills that lined the streets where historic temples and shrines stood was quite easy on the eyes. The smell of petrichor only added to the atmosphere during the rainy season, but this crisp autumn breeze was nice too.

"Screee, screee..." I looked up to see two black kites circling.

I think there was a song about how black kites are part of the romance of Shonan, I thought, squinting my eyes as I looked up at the bright sky. Their wings looked huge even from a distance. They were nice to observe from far away, but they were scary up close. *They're a bird of prey, after all. And since I'm a nue, they might think I'm their lunch.* A toratsugumi was a small bird. So was a hachijo tsugumi.

The black kite was superior in the ecosystem. They'd attack me. I walked

slowly while smiling dryly at my imagination. I was moved by the various things that I saw because I was alone and my mind was blank. If Hachijo-kun were next to me, I'm sure it would be fun, but I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else but him.

I was happy about that, but at the same time it was a bit of a shame. But it was *because* we were apart like this that I could think, *"I miss you."*

Just as I passed in front of Kencho-ji, I heard a chime from my phone. *Oh, it's a text from Hachijo-kun.*

YASHIRO: Look at this trail. It's pretty rough.

The picture he had attached showed bare earth, with tree roots crisscrossing over it. It looked like pretty rough terrain, and I was secretly glad I hadn't gone with him. I would've just held him back. *Those roots are crazy, though. They look like...*

NUE: It looks like capillaries.

I responded and put my phone away. As I walked along the road, I saw many tall trees. The shaded ground was dim, but when I looked up, the branches and leaves swaying against the bright sky were beautiful.

I was right next to Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu. If I went up the stone steps in front of me, I would soon come out to the main shrine. It was more appropriate to enter from the main street, but I got the impression that students on field trips often came from this side. So I ascended these stairs, canopied by the fall foliage.

And I arrived at the main shrine. No wonder this was the symbol of Kamakura; it was so extravagant. *I think this is where Lady Shizuka danced, like in that poem I'd thought of earlier.*

"I miss that person who stepped through the white snow of Mt. Yoshino and went deep into the mountain."

After losing Yoshitsune, she was forced to dance here at Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu by the new shogun.

What would my poem be if I had to dance?

Nue, Nue.

Even if I were divided in two

at last I will unite with you again—

You, who calls me Nue.

Maybe something like that.

“I want to see Nue dancing.” I bet Hachijo-kun would say something like that.
“Won’t you dance?”

I finished my visit to the main shrine with a bashful smile on the inside. I bowed twice, clapped twice, then bowed once.

I turned around and saw the magnificent view of Kamakura spreading out below. The stone steps seemed to stretch on forever. Beyond that was a torii and then the streets of Kamakura, with a hint of the sea that existed beyond it. It was an eternal landscape.

Admiring the scenery, I went down the stone steps and passed by a ginkgo tree.

“Huh?”

“Squeak!”

“Waah!”

I felt a strange sensation under my right leg. In shock, I stumbled and fell right on my butt on the stone steps. *Ugh. I’m glad I didn’t fall forward, but it still hurts.*

I rubbed my rear end tearfully, and saw a gray shadow run past my feet.

Huh? A squirrel?

It looked just like some kind of baby rodent. It was fairly large, and had gray fur with no stripes. I'd accidentally stepped on it, but it seemed fine.

I remember hearing about squirrel overpopulation here...

Like the black kites, they had increased in number and become a problem in the Kamakura area. *Regardless, I'm still sorry I stepped on you. But... I stepped on a squirrel. Ha ha.*

It was like something out of a manga. I took out my phone and sent Hachijokun a message.

NUE: I accidentally stepped on some kind of baby rodent

NUE: It's fine and it ran away, but I still feel bad.

I was fully aware it was a terrible sentence. I knew that he would wonder what in the world I was talking about. His reply came immediately.

YASHIRO: If that baby's a masochist it might come back for you.

YASHIRO: And it'll say "I'm the rodent-like creature you stepped on!"

I definitely didn't want to face the wrath of a masochistic squirrel. That would be bitter revenge...

NUE: Ew, I don't want that

I stood up, dusting off the back of my clothes, and continued descending the stairs, being more careful of where I stepped.

After finally reaching the bottom of the long stone steps, I thought about my next plan.

If I want to go straight to my next destination, I should head to the Kamakura

Station. Or maybe I should stop by Genji Pond at Benzaiten. Tsubame said it's like a lucky spot for couples... But there are also stories about a jealous god, so what should I do? I don't even know if it has any effect if you go alone.

At times like this, my overthinking nature tended to come out. But if I stood there thinking all day, I wouldn't have time to do anything. Hachijo-kun was always so patient and waited for me to respond, though.

Just then...

"Hey, you over there. Are you worried about something?"

Surprised by the sudden voice, I turned around and saw a flirtatious-looking boy with brightly dyed hair, and a girl who I could only describe as the *gyaru* version of Hanamizawa-san.

They both wore the same uniform as me, so they must have been first-year students at Ikanyama High School. But I didn't recognize them from my classmates. Were they from another class?

The male student smiled at me. "We've been waiting so long for this fun field trip, so why are you sulking around all by yourself? Did your friends leave you behind?"

"Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

Apparently, he was worried about me being alone and called out to me. I was relieved that they seemed like nice people, but at times like this, I was at a loss for words. The more I rushed to say things like "Thank you for worrying" and "I'm fine," the more I wondered if those were the right things to say, and I ended up just standing there saying nothing at all.

While I stood there silently, the boy approached me.

"We don't have to study today, so it's a waste if you don't enjoy it, right? Plus, it's boring to be alone. Don't you think it'd be better to wander around town with everyone else rather than exploring Kamakura alone? Why don't you come hang out with us?"

I felt like he was being a bit too forceful, but in the end I could see that this was just his way of trying to be nice. I figured he was probably a kind person. I

was trying to figure out how to answer when the *gyaru* beside him waved her hand.

“You can say no if you don’t want to! Ginga can be an idiot sometimes, so you gotta be direct with him or he won’t get it.” Apparently she sensed my confusion.

“Hey, hey, Biina-san. Who’s stupid?”

“The person in front of me.”

The two of them, whose names seemed to be Ginga and Biina, continued joking around with each other.

Both of them seemed to be good people in different ways. I felt sorry that I couldn’t reply immediately. Finally, I mustered up the courage to speak and opened my mouth. But all of a sudden someone grabbed my body and pulled me into their arms.

Huh? What?!

“Just what do you think you’re doing? You’re clearly making her uncomfortable!” Before I knew it, there was Yuzuki Sato, who I was supposed to have parted ways with at Engaku-ji. But now she was hugging me and glaring at the two of them with a threatening look in her eyes.

It seemed she had misunderstood the situation and thought they were bullying me. She seemed desperate to help me. Just then...

“I had a feeling it was Ginga and Biina. What are you guys doing?”

“Oh, it’s Ishikuma-dono and Shindo-dono. Good afternoon to you.”

Hadori-kun came over with another male student I didn’t know; he was burly and had a shaved, sporty haircut. Hadori-kun knew these two? The flirty guy was Ginga Ishikuma, and the *gyaru* was Biina Shindo.

After we all talked with each other, we were able to clear up the misunderstanding. The tense mood had disappeared, and now Hadori-kun was chatting with Shindo-san and Ishikuma-kun.

“Also, Torano-san has a boyfriend. They’re just doing their own thing right now, that’s all.”

“For real?!”

“So you *were* trying to hit on her!”

“No! I just thought she was cute, okay?” Ginga-kun said.

Biina-san laughed out loud. “Ginga’s got a thing for weird girls like her. But man, this might be a record for how fast he got dumped!”

“I said, that’s not how I meant it!”

W-Weird girls? I was aware that I was a bit unfriendly, but this was the first time I’d been called weird, so I was in shock. *Does Hachijo-kun think that about me too?*

“*Aha ha... Of course not!*” In my imagination, I heard his response. What was that pause all about?! I felt a little deflated. *Oh, right. I haven’t thanked Sato-san yet.*

I looked over at her and she noticed my gaze. “Thanks for trying to protect me,” I said.

“Heh heh. Of course,” she said with a bright smile. “You helped me out before too, Torano-san.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why are you so stubborn about that?”

Somehow it seemed that they had already figured it out, so it probably wouldn’t be a big deal to admit it now. But even so, some things were better left unsaid.

I bowed to Sato-san before leaving. I headed for Kamakura Station so I could hop on the Enoden to get to my next destination. I still had a long time until I had to meet up with everyone else, so I could enjoy some more alone time. At least...that’s what I thought.

“Seriously, though—this is *such* a coincidence!” Hanamizawa-san sat next to me on the Enoden with a grin on her face.

After I’d parted ways with Sato-san and the others, I had run into her at Kamakura Station. It seemed like I was having trouble being alone today.

Kamakura was a small place and everyone was walking around, so I suppose I was bound to keep running into everyone. *What should I talk about, though?*

"It's true, I do want to get closer to Torano-san!"

"So I thought maybe if I ran into her there, we could hang out."

She was saying that the other day, and we'd ended up running into each other just as she'd said. *Should I say something to her? I'm just not good at this sort of thing.*

"Speaking of Enoden..." she suddenly said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"I rode the Enoden when I came here in elementary school. I remember something really clearly. We got on at Fujisawa and were heading towards Kamakura Station. We passed through the residential area like *whoosh!* and then all of a sudden it got bright like *bam!* and then all of a sudden you could see the ocean, like *ta-daaa!*"

That was an awful lot of onomatopoeia.

"Yeah... I understand." I had a feeling I knew what she meant. "The scenery outside the window from Shichirigahama to Enoshima goes from *bam* to *ta-daa!*"

"Wow, I didn't think you'd get it!" Hanamizawa-san smiled happily.

"That makes you happy?"

"Of course. That means we have something to talk about."

I didn't say anything.

"Aw, c'mon! When you just go silent, it makes me sad!"

She didn't look sad at all. She was so confusing. Maybe the reason why Hachijo-kun couldn't help but pay attention to her was because she was so forcefully friendly.

"Isn't there a place around here that was used for the setting of an anime?"

"Yes, in front of Kamakura High School. A basketball manga took place there."

“Oh, that’s right! I feel like Chi-chan mentioned that. She loves shonen manga.”

“Are you going there?” I asked, wondering where she was headed.

“No, I’m getting off before then. At the next stop.”

“Wait...”

The train had just left Gokurakuji. And the next station was...

“Next stop, Inamuragasaki. Inamuragasaki.” The announcement came over the speakers.

A few minutes later, the train pulled into the station. Both of us stood up at the same time and got off the train together. We were getting off at the same station. I now realized what she had in that large shoulder bag of hers, and guessed we were heading to the same place. She seemed to realize it too.

“Looks like we’re gonna be together for a while, huh?” she said with a grin. All I could do was smile back at her in the same way. We crossed the railroad, turned the corner in front of the convenience store, and headed towards the ocean. Then, we walked along the road that ran by the coastline. Even though it was November, the warm sun and the salty sea breeze still felt like summer.

“Ah, that’s right. Hey, Torano-san.” All of a sudden Hanamizawa-san took out her phone. “Can I take a picture? You can turn around if you want.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I thought I’d tell Chi-chan about the miracle of you and I ending up at the same place.”

“Okay, that’s fine.”

I would’ve been nervous if she’d asked to take a selfie with me, but it was fine if I could turn around. Plus, she was only going to show it to Ido-san.

I heard the sound of the camera and Hanamizawa-san typing on her phone.

In the meantime, we had arrived at our destination.

There was a sign that said “Inamuragasaki Natural Hot Springs.”

Even though Tsubame had teased me about it, I’d brought along a pair of

spare underwear so that I could fully enjoy this hot spring. I didn't want to put on the same underwear after I took a bath, after all.

I thought that it would feel a little naughty and daring to take a dip in the hot springs during a school day (it was a field trip, but we were still technically supposed to be in class), and apparently Hanamizawa-san had the same idea. She was excited to “hang out naked” as she called it when we went into the building.

“Aha ha ha... This is amazing!” Her voice sounded like it was melting, but I had to agree with her.

“It really is.”

We were soaking side by side in hot water on the second floor of the building, in a hot spring with a view. The water was the perfect temperature—not too hot and not too cold, and we could enjoy a panoramic view of Enoshima and the ocean.

The breeze that blew in through the open window was cool on our faces, but our bodies were warm in the water. *A cold face and a warm body... I could stay in here forever.*

“Haaaah...” I couldn't help but let out a relaxed voice.

I glanced beside me and saw that Hanamizawa-san seemed to be enjoying it as much as I was. Her skin was slightly flushed from the warm water, and she looked really sexy. I couldn't help but keep stealing looks at her. *She just looks so soft.* Not just her...you know...breasts.

She wasn't overweight, but curvy in all the right places. Her skin was flushed pink like a strawberry daifuku, and looked just as soft. It made me want to reach out and just pinch her arm.



I recalled a tribute given to Cabanel's painting "The Birth of Venus" (not Botticelli's): *"This goddess, drowned in a sea of milk, looks like a delicious dance-hall girl, but not of flesh and blood—that would be indecent—but made of a sort of pink and white marzipan."*

That was what Hanamizawa-san's body looked like. She had the kind of body which would be nice to hold, and I was certain that was what men were usually attracted to. So I couldn't help but compare myself to her. *I wonder if Hachijo-kun prefers her body type...*

I splashed water on my face, embarrassed of these thoughts. When I looked up, my eyes met hers.

"What?" I asked. She gave me a shy smile.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how you have a really nice figure."

I instinctively crossed my arms over my chest. I was the one who had been looking at her, so I felt suddenly embarrassed that she was looking at my body too. She gave me a little smile.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. You've got a really nice body!"

"No, I don't." When I told her that I was jealous of her body, her eyes widened.

"Oh, trust me. You have more than enough of what guys like."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Haven't you ever shown them to Yashiro-kun?"

Shown my naked body to Hachijo-kun?!

"No, no! Absolutely not!" I shook my head violently. Even though Hachijo-kun was, you know...my boyfriend and everything, our relationship wasn't like that...

...yet.

It's not as though I'm not interested. And I've read a lot of books where a man and woman in love take their relationship to the next level...physically.

But I wanted to be really cautious about taking that next step. *Ah, but if*

Hachijo-kun said he wanted to, I might let him...

My mind was a jumble, and I felt like I was going to overheat. Realizing I was panicking, I took a deep breath, taking the chilly air from the window into my lungs, trying to cool myself down—as well as my thoughts. I began to feel a bit calmer.

Then I realized Hanamizawa-san was looking at me, waving her hands around.

“Why are you waving your hands like you’re worshipping me?”

“I was thinking about a poem we read in literature class. You know, the one that was all, ‘Are you sure you’re not gonna touch my beautiful skin? Touch me already!’”

“Are you talking about Akiko Yosano’s poem? She’s not *that* much of a tsundere.”

I looked up at the ceiling and remembered that poem, the famous “Thou Shalt Not Die.” When it was published, it was criticized for being inappropriate for a woman of the time. But many women back then really related to it.

“You preach much about virtue—

A hot current of blood

flows beneath my soft skin

which you do not dare to touch.

Doesn’t it make you lonely?”

As I murmured the poem aloud, Hanamizawa-san nodded. “Yeah, yeah. That one. It’s a shame Yashiro-kun hasn’t seen your soft, beautiful skin yet.”

Blorp.

That just made me think of those naughty thoughts again, and I sank below the water. I was definitely getting overheated.

After we got out of the bath, Hanamizawa-san and I had lunch using the meal tickets we had bought together earlier, then left the hot springs.

“Guess we should go meet up with everyone else!” she said, stretching. She was about to start walking back the way we came, towards the station.

“Huh?” I blurted out. Did she really plan on going straight to Hase right now? But the weather was so nice. I thought it was a waste to go now. I stood there for a while; she eventually stopped and turned when she realized I wasn’t following her.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Torano-san?” She gave me a puzzled look.

“Um... Don’t you want to see it?” I asked hesitantly.

“See what?” She looked confused. I guess she really didn’t know. At first I thought maybe I shouldn’t tell her, but then I remembered how she’d said she wanted to get close to me. I knew that she genuinely meant it, so it would be rude of me if I didn’t let her in.

So I mustered up the most courage I had the whole day. “Well... Will you come with me for a bit?”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

I started leading the way. It wasn’t far, though. We crossed the road in front of the hot springs building and entered Inamuragasaki Park, which was adjacent to a small hill with dense trees nearby.

“This way.” I quickly hurried up the stairs so she wouldn’t look around too much.

She gave me a puzzled look. “What, you just wanted to go to a park? Is there something here?”

“You’ll see,” I answered as I glanced back at her. *Good. You can see it perfectly.*

And when I reached the top of the stairs, I turned around, right towards Hanamizawa-san.

“Turn around.”

“Huh?” She turned around just like I said, then let out a weird noise.

“Whooooa!”

From here, you could see a panoramic view of Shichirigahama, Enoshima, and Mt. Fuji all at once. The top half of our vision was filled with the blue sky above, the ocean and surrounding town and greenery below.

“Wow, this is like a million-dollar view!” she sighed in awe.

I was glad she liked it.

“When it’s sunny like this, you can see Mt. Fuji clearly. I thought it would be a waste to come all the way to Inamuragasaki and not see this view.”

“Ohh, I see. That’s why you stopped,” she said with a grin. “I’m so happy I got to see this view, and that you wanted to share it with me.”

Hearing her say that made me feel a little embarrassed, and I wondered if my aloof expression hid it. Just then, she took both of my hands.

“I want to become friends with you, Torano-san!”

“Um... Is that why you’re so aggressive?”

“I know I’m aggressive. But I like talking with you. I can restrain myself, though. And if I’m bothering you, you can just ignore me.”

“Well, I guess as long as you can hold back a bit...”

“Times like this are when I should call you by your name! Can I call you Tsugumi-chan?”

“I thought you were going to show some restraint?”

No wonder she was so popular. Her communication skills were extraordinary. No wonder Hachijo-kun had such a hard time with her. I let out a sigh.

“My answer is the name of Shakespeare’s famous comedy.”

“What do you mean?”

“*As You Like It*. It means, go ahead.”

“Aha ha. I don’t get it at all!” She laughed, hugging me tightly.

“You’re so funny, Tsugumi-chan.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Even though I felt like she was totally taking charge of the situation, I didn’t

mind it. I had a feeling I'd just made a bond that wouldn't break so easily.



After that, we headed to Hase to meet up with the others, who were already gathered in front of the temple. I saw Sato-san, Ido-san, Hadori-kun, and Hachijo-kun.

The moment she spotted us, Ido-san started waving.

“Oh, it looks like everyone’s already here,” I said.

“Yep! Let’s go, *Tsugumi-chan*. Hey, everyone!” She grabbed me by the hand and waved towards the others as she ran, practically dragging me over to them.

Hachijo-kun smiled at me. “Hey, Nue. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, I think I did,” I answered carefully.

He responded with a grin. “Glad to hear it. You were with Hanamizawa-san, huh?”

“Yep. And you met up with Ido-san?”

“Hm? How did you know?”

“I saw the picture Ido-san texted to Hanamizawa-san at lunch.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. She said something about a prank.”

I suddenly understood what that meant. I looked over at the prankster herself. As Ido-san and I locked eyes, I could tell she knew what I was thinking. She came over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I won’t steal him away, Nue-chan,” she whispered.

Wait, how does she know my nickname?!

I blinked at her in surprise. She giggled as she pulled away from me. I turned towards Hachijo-kun with a startled expression on my face. *What in the world happened between you two?!*

Chapter Five: The Photo

We were at Hasedera Temple, officially called Kaiko-zan Jisho-in Hasedera.

It was known as the face of this Hase district, and the locals called the temple “Hase Kannon.” The precincts offered a view of beautiful plants in all four seasons, and were known as the Western paradise of Kamakura.

“That’s what it says, anyway,” Sato-san said while reading the temple’s website on her phone.

We met up in front of Hasedera’s entrance and lined up to buy admission tickets for the second group tour of temples and shrines. It was pretty crowded because so many of our classmates had also chosen to go sightseeing here.

“Wow... This sounds like an amazing temple, doesn’t it?” Hanamizawa-san said.

“When I was in elementary school, I remember taking a group photo at something like an observatory,” added Ido-san.

Hasedera’s observatory certainly sounded like the kind of place you’d want to take a class picture for a field trip.

After each of us bought an admission ticket, we entered the temple area.

“That reminds me,” Ido-san said right after we got inside. “When I was in elementary school, I remember getting off at Hase Station and seeing the Great Buddha, so I thought that it was at Hasedera. I was surprised when I found out it’s actually at another temple.”

“Oh, yeah!”

“Me too!”

Nod, nod.

Sato-san and I heartily agreed, while Nue kept silent and nodded her head.

I thought that was probably a common misconception, but Hanamizawa-san

and Hadori-kun had a confused look on their faces.

Ido-san's eyes widened at their reaction. "Wait, did you two already know that?"

That was surprising. The two of them exchanged glances.

"No... It's the Great Buddha of Kamakura, so I thought it was near Kamakura Station."

"Yeah. I thought it was near Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gu."

The four of us stumbled forward like something out of a manga. That wasn't just a misunderstanding—that was pure ignorance.

"I understand Kanon thinking that, but *you*, Yukito-kun?" Sato-san said in shock.

Hadori-kun laughed. "I'm sorry."

Then Hanamizawa-san put her arm around Sato-san's neck and poked her on the cheek. "Hey, hey. What was that part about me supposed to mean?"

"I had a feeling you wouldn't have known in the first place."

"You're getting pretty cocky lately, aren't you?"

"I think if Yuzuki can say something like that to you, it's gotten pretty bad," Ido-san commented.

Hanamizawa-san lunged towards her. "What?!"

This group sure was loud. Meanwhile, Nue seemed stressed just as she usually did when dealing with more than three people. I kept looking back to make sure she was still there and hadn't gotten lost.

Out of habit, I turned around again and made eye contact with her. She gave me a questioning look and tipped her head to the side.

"Just making sure you were following us."

"I'm here."

"Yes. You exist. But it's more like 'I think, therefore I am,' isn't it?"

"Who are you, Descartes?"

“I was just making a joke,” I said as I walked right next to her so I wouldn’t lose her.

Since Hasedera was a mountain temple, there were a lot of stone steps. With lots of water flowing on the grounds, the air was damp, and the scent of the leaves on the ground and overhead wafted on the breeze. Once you entered the temple grounds, that atmosphere was like stepping into another world.

There was a pond shaped like a *manji*, and a strange stone statue called “Ryo-en Jizo” with three small bodies nestled together. It felt like the kind of place you might be spirited away from.

“So you were with Hanamizawa-san?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“Was it okay? Was it awkward being alone with her?”

“It was fine. It was mostly her talking, but she’s a nice person. She waits for me to answer so I don’t have to worry about that,” she said as she knelt in front of the Ryo-en Jizo. “Plus... I started thinking about something after talking to her.”

“What’s that?”

“I realized that ever since I met you, school’s gotten really fun. But... Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had met her first. Would we have become friends, and would it still be fun?”

“If you had met her before me?” I imagined that scenario in my mind. Hanamizawa-san’s aggressive personality could be a little frightening sometimes, but she was a good person at her core, so I was sure she would’ve gotten along with Nue. And then if that happened, she would’ve become friends with Ido-san and Sato-san, since they also had good personalities.

Hadori-kun was different, though—since he was pretty hot-blooded, I wasn’t sure if she would’ve gotten as close to him.

So it probably would’ve just been Nue, Hanamizawa-san, Ido-san, and Sato-san hanging out together. Just the four of them would chat after school and go out for desserts.

“Sounds like an anime from Houbunsha or Ichijinsha.”

The four of them would start a band or some kind of club and talk about meaningless things, or start the same part-time job... Yeah, I could definitely picture that.

Nue must’ve been imagining the same thing, because she started to laugh. “Heh heh. You think we’d all hold hands and skip together?”

“Please don’t. Although if you all were guys, you’d be like a gang.”

I had a feeling they’d be so close there would be no chance for me to approach her. I never would have been able to date Nue. “I’m really glad that I talked to you first, before Hanamizawa-san,” I said earnestly.

Nue quietly shook her head. “No, I could say the same. If Hanamizawa-san or Ido-san had gotten to know you before I did, I might not have had a part in your story.”

“Really? I don’t think so.” In my case, I’d fallen in love with Nue at first sight, so I couldn’t even imagine replacing her with someone else.

But Nue shook her head again. “I probably wouldn’t. After all, there are tons of love stories about a popular girl meeting a loner boy.”

“Ah, I guess that does happen a lot in light novels and manga.” Some famous titles immediately came to mind. I guess that meant it was a pretty common trope.

Nue started taking pictures of the statues. “So if the story had been like that, I don’t think I would’ve become your girlfriend. And now that I know what it’s like to spend time with you, I wouldn’t want that at all.”

“Nue...”

“When I saw the picture of you and Ido-san together, I got a little jealous and thought how I didn’t want to give you up to her. And I thought how glad I was to have met you and gotten away with you first. I’m glad I told you I liked you that day.”

She avoided eye contact with me, so I figured she was feeling shy. She was just too adorable. If we were alone, I might’ve thrown my arms around her right

then and there. I sat down beside Nue and looked at the statue with her. “I see. So this is called the Ryo-en statue—‘good luck.’ Do you think that means we’ll both have good luck now?”

“Heh heh. Maybe.”

We both laughed and smiled at each other in front of the statue. Just then...

“Hey, you two.” We heard Hadori-kun’s voice behind us, causing us both to jump. He laughed. “Sorry to interrupt you two in your private little world, but we’re here as a group right now. I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’d appreciate it if you paid attention to us too.” He pointed behind him and I saw the other three staring at us with similar bemused looks on their faces. Apparently we’d kept them waiting while we chatted in front of the statue.

“It’s like you only have eyes for each other!”

“No kidding. They might seem cold at first, but they’re actually pretty lovey-dovey!”

“I want a relationship like that...”

Once they’d all said their piece, Nue shyly hid behind me.

After that, we all went to see a breathtaking view of the thousand Jizo statues, and finally made it up the stone stairs to take in the incredible scenery at the top, with commentary like “Yeah, I definitely came here in elementary school!” as we arrived at the principal idol of worship at Hasedera Kannon.

Standing at the back of the room was a giant gold figure of Kannon looking down on the worshipers.

“Whoa! It’s huge! Was it always that big?!” Hadori-kun exclaimed.

“I feel like if this was a manga, they’d have that sound effect **LOOOOOOOM** superimposed over it,” Ido-san said.

I could see where they were coming from.

“In the Nara period, Kannon was cast into the sea in the Kinki region, drifted all the way across the sea to Yokosuka, and was enshrined here when this temple was founded.”

“How could something this big float across the sea? Wouldn’t it sink?”

“Religion needs mystique, you know. One theory is that oysters brought it here,” Sato-san said, reading from the pamphlet.

“It was an oyster rider?!” Hanamizawa-san exclaimed.

“It kinda looks like it could start moving at any time,” Hadori-kun said, looking up at it with a sigh.

Hm?

“‘It might move,’” I said.

“What?!”

All four of them looked at me. *Uhh, what?*

“‘Kanzeon Bosatsu is a bodhisattva who has sworn that he will not become a *nyorai*—someone who has attained enlightenment—until he saves all people. Therefore, he is all-seeing, watching over everyone above heaven and below, so that if someone asks for help, he will immediately go to save them. So he might move.’”

The four of them stared dumbfounded as I recited those words. I pointed to the person behind me. “That’s what the girl who loves visiting shrines and temples says.”

“You’re interpreting for her again?!” they all said in unison. I had a feeling I wouldn’t be hearing the end of this gag anytime soon.

“Why does Kannon-sama have such a hero-like backstory?” Hadori-kun asked, surprised.

Nue answered through me again. “Um... ‘Kannon-sama actually has a heroic side.’”

“Like what, specifically?” Hadori-kun asked.

“‘He can go from a giant statue to human size.’”

“Like Ultraman?!” said Hanamizawa-san.

“‘He actually has thirty different forms he uses throughout the world.’”

“Not even the latest Kamen Rider has that many!!!” said Ido-san.

““Next week, join us again on *Namu Kanzeon Bosatsu*!”

“That sounds like some kind of magical girl anime...” said Yuzuki.

Uhh, Nue? Hello?

Was she saying this stuff on purpose to make fun of me?

“She says ‘You can see his thirty forms over there at the Kannon Museum. You can buy tickets where you buy protective charms.’”

“What is this, a commercial? I am curious, though. Let’s go see,” Hadori-kun said, with Hanamizawa-san echoing his suggestion.

After we worshiped at the giant Hase Kannon idol, we bought tickets at the reception desk and saw the many Kannon statues in the museum.

Some looked like an old man, some looked like a god of war, some even looked like a foreigner, and they all had a different number of arms. There was a lot of variation.

“I bet Ikanji would be able to explain all this stuff.”

“You’re right. It’s a shame he’s not here.”

“Huh? Who’s that?” Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san asked.

I recognized Ikanji as the name of the temple by our school, but what did that have to do with it?

“If there are so many different forms, maybe it could be made into some kind of online game.”

“*Kannon-sama Ranbu*? But they’re all the same guy.”

“They’d only have to hire one voice actor.”

“That’s way too much work for one person. He’d have to play thirty roles!”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san kept going back and forth about this, but I couldn’t really follow their conversation.

But...

I glanced over at Nue, who was gazing at the Kannon statue in front of us.

Normally she had such an unfriendly, aloof look on her face, but she had a softer expression now. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

Putting Sato-san aside, the other three would not have been so interested in the statue of Kannon if they hadn't listened to Nue's explanation. I thought it was pretty impressive that her storytelling—even if it was through me—had piqued the interest of these three popular kids.

She realized I was staring at her. "What?"

I gave her a playful smile. "Nothing. Just thinking about how cute you are."

She blushed and kicked my ankle. The statue of Kannon-sama had that same archaic smile on its face all statues seemed to have, but for some reason it looked like he was almost amused at us.

After taking a tour of the museum, we headed towards the observatory.

The observatory of Hasedera Temple was a scenic spot where you could see Yuigahama across the city, and was a standard place for taking commemorative photos. If you spent your elementary and junior high school days in Tokyo, Saitama, Kanagawa, or Chiba, you've taken a photo here at least once.

"Time to take a pic for our alibi!" Hanamizawa-san said, clapping her hands.

I guessed she meant the second photo that would serve as proof that we had visited our required two temples or shrines.

"Will you stop calling it that?"

"I can't think of what else to call it."

Ido-san and Hadori-kun both sighed and laughed at her.

We asked a nearby photography club member to take the picture for us. The six of us lined up with the scenery of Hase in the background, next to a poster that warned about black kites flying overhead.

"Ah, look, Chi-chan. They sell dumplings."

"Save it for later. Wait, don't tell me you still want to eat more?!"

"Is it okay if we line up like this, Yukito-kun?" Sato-san asked.

“We have the other one too. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Come on, Yashiro-kun and Tsugumi-chan,” Ido-san said. “Get closer.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Once we had decided on our position, our photographer called out to us.

“Here we go. Say cheese!”

We squeezed together for the picture as he clicked the shutter.



After he took the photo, Hanamizawa-san and the others decided to go get some dumplings while Nue and I sat beneath a cherry blossom tree. Obviously it wasn't blooming in November, but there was something unusual hanging from it.

Tink, tink, tink...

It was a wind chime that swayed in the wind and made a gentle sound.

Although it was a wind chime, it wasn't the traditional Japanese kind that looked like an upside-down goldfish bowl, but rather a bundle of hanging bells that looked like iron pipes. Every time the wind swayed it made a sound, creating a sort of South Asian atmosphere.

Tink, tink, tink...

I felt like this sound was familiar for some reason.

"...Oh. It's the sound from the lobby of the spa."

There was something like that hanging up at the spa I'd gone to with Nue and Hanamizawa-san.

"...The interior of that spa was inspired by the island of Bali. That's probably some kind of Balinese wind chime. This one definitely looks like the one at the spa," Nue mused as she looked up at it.

At that moment, the wind blew through again, shaking Nue's hair and the wind chimes all at once.

Tink, tink, tink...

Nue looked so picturesque as she sat there under the tree with her hair blowing in the wind. I knew I'd regret not capturing this moment, so I quickly took out my phone.

Click.

She turned and gave me a puzzled look when she heard it.

"Sneaking a pic like a voyeur?"

"No, I'm taking this picture proudly."

“But why did you take it?”

“Because you looked beautiful,” I told her plainly, causing her to turn away in a huff.

“Well...fine, then,” she said. I couldn’t see her expression from my position, but judging by how pink her ears were as they poked out of her hair, she was definitely blushing.

I wanted to go around and look at her face, but I knew she would run away, so I restrained myself.

Just then, Hanamizawa-san and the others returned. “Sorry we took so long! We bought dumplings!” She proudly showed them off. “You sure you two don’t want any?” she asked, glancing at Nue who was still turned away from me.

“Yeah. I’m already full.”

“Huh?” She stared at me blankly.

Nue kicked me in the shin.

After that, we visited Benten Cave and then left Hasedera. We headed towards Enoshima on the Enoden from Hase Station, then walked to Katase-Enoshima Station on the Odakyu Enoshima Line where the field trip would end. Our teacher was standing in front of this strange station, which reminded me of the Ryugu Castle, taking roll call. I went over to him and told him that our whole group was there.

“Okay. Good job.”

After our Japanese teacher, Sarashina-sensei (who we called Sarashi) checked us out, the field trip was over.

It was now past 3 p.m. We could either return home from here, or go sightseeing around Enoshima as long as we didn’t stay past 6 p.m.

Most students decided to visit the nearby aquarium or wander around Enoshima.

“What are you guys doing after this? Kanon and I were thinking about going to the aquarium,” Ido-san said. Hanamizawa-san nodded in agreement.

“Yuzuki and I are going to Enoshima,” Hadori-kun said.

“There are a lot of shops there. I bet it’ll be fun,” Sato-san answered. Apparently the two of them were choosing to sightsee around Enoshima.

A guy and a girl alone together like that was definitely a date... But they needed to be careful going on a date to Enoshima. I decided I should probably offer some words of advice.

Just then, Hanamizawa-san looked at us. “What about Yashiro-kun and Tsugumi-chan?”

“Hmm, well...” I turned around and looked at Nue. She silently nodded her head. We’d discussed it the other day in the library, but we’d agreed to go to a certain place after the field trip was over. So her nodding at me was a signal that she hadn’t changed her mind.

I grinned. “We’re going on a boat.”

“A *boat*?!” All four of them answered in unison.

I couldn’t help but laugh at their stunned faces.

Chapter Six: Someday

“The ship’s leaving soon!” Someone called out from the bridge that crossed over to Enoshima. A sign read “Enoshima *Benten Maru*” in front of the small hut.

“If you’re going to Iwaya, you should take this ship! It’s leaving soon!”

Hachijo-kun and I exchanged glances.

“Did you hear that? Let’s hurry, Nue.”

I nodded.

We jogged over to the bridge and told the clerk there that we wanted to get on the boat. We paid the fee, crossed the pier, and climbed on the small boat anchored there. We’d discussed riding it beforehand. It was called the *Benten Maru*.

The busiest place in Enoshima was probably the place right across the sea—Enoshima Benzaiten Nakamise-dori. With souvenir shops and tons of food stalls, it was a place where you could have a great time just looking around. However, I really wasn’t great with crowded places like that.

Instead, I was more interested in Enoshima Iwaya, which was called the birthplace of Benzaiten worship.

I couldn’t remember if I’d ever gone there before. I knew I’d been to Enoshima, but I had no memory of going to Iwaya.

Hachijo-kun had a similar experience, so that’s why we both decided to go together this time. And the fastest way to get there was to take this boat, the *Benten Maru*.

If you walked from Nakamise-dori, you’d have to go up and down lots of stone steps, but if you crossed the sea, Iwaya was just right there.

We climbed up the metal plank and got onto the ship. The *Benten Maru* was small, about the size of a fishing boat. Half of the seats were covered, but the

other half were not, which gave it a sort of freeing feeling.

“Do you want to go to the back where the seats aren’t covered?” Hachijo-kun asked.

“I’d rather take one of the covered seats. They’re lower so it’ll feel like the ocean is closer.”

“Got it. Go ahead and take the window seat.”

“Thanks.”

We sat side by side in the covered seat section. The seats were pretty small, so we had to sit kind of crammed together. Hachijo-kun was so close I could feel his body heat. Honestly, my heart was pounding.

Right after I sat down, the captain released the ropes and the plank.

“We’re about to depart, so please take your seats!”

The attendant had been right—the boat really was leaving soon.

The captain turned on the engine, and the boat began to slowly drift away from the shore.

“Riding on a boat is oddly exciting, isn’t it? It feels different than being on a train or an airplane,” Hachijo-kun said.

I nodded. “Yeah, I get that.” To be honest, the swaying motion of the boat was something I was completely unaccustomed to, and it made me feel strange.

The vibration of the engine shook our seats as our journey continued.

“It sounds like the engine is clapping and cheering us on,” Hachijo-kun said suddenly.

Was he quoting from a book? I couldn’t place it.

“What’s that from?”

“Murder on the Mississippi.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“An old adventure game from when the Famicom first came out. I was watching a playthrough of it. It’s supposed to be a mystery game, but all of a

sudden a knife will shoot out and instantly kill you. It was pretty interesting.”

Oh, it was a game. No wonder I didn’t know it. It made me kind of frustrated, though.

“That’s not fair.”

“Really? I feel kind of happy that I got a point on you, though,” he said with a chuckle. Honestly, he could be surprisingly mischievous.

“Look, Hachijo-kun! It’s Mt. Fuji!”

“Whoa, you’re right. It’s huge.”

You could see Mt. Fuji across the ocean from the left side of the boat.

On a clear day, I could see Mt. Fuji from my neighborhood if I climbed up a big hill or a tall building. I’d thought about it when I was in Inamuragasaki, but here it looked so much bigger.

“It’s nice seeing Mt. Fuji across the ocean. It’s like ‘The Great Wave off Kanagawa’ will come splashing in at any moment.”

“That painting was done from the Tokyo Bay, wasn’t it?”

“What? Really?!”

We chatted about silly things like that as the boat made its way to Enoshima. We passed another boat coming from the other direction, and could hear a rumbling noise from the bottom.

Hm? What was that noise?

“Oh, the bottom of the ship is hitting the surface of the sea due to the height difference of the waves,” Hachijo-kun told me. He must’ve noticed that I was wondering.

“Oh. You sound like you know a lot.”

“I think I heard something like that when I went on a family trip to the Seto Inland Sea.”

The Seto Inland Sea... It seemed like a nice place. I wanted to go on a trip there someday. Maybe with Hachijo-kun... Heh heh.

I put my hands on my cheeks as I imagined it. Every time we were alone, it felt like my thoughts were just sunshine and roses.

Speaking of which, last night I was thinking about what happened—or didn't happen—before the school festival.

I glanced over at Hachijo-kun.

“Oh! We're here, Nue.”

All of a sudden he turned towards me, startling me. According to that one saying in Okinawa, my soul should've fallen right out of my body from the shock.

While I tried to calm myself down, the *Benten Maru* pulled up alongside the shore with a *thump*. We crossed the metal plank and onto the pier.

As soon as we got off the boat, we were greeted with a view of the vast Pacific Ocean and a rocky shore. The natural landscape seemed to be roughly carved out here.

As we passed behind people fishing on the beach, the shallow seawater created clear tidal pools below our feet. It was like...

“Ooh, it looks like a tiny aquarium.” Hachijo-kun must have been thinking the same thing.

Just like he said, it looked like a natural aquarium.

“It looks like fish and crabs are inside. If I were a kid, I'd be so excited right now.”

“You're not?”

“It would be lame to act like that in front of you, Nue.”

“Don't worry about me. I'm pretty excited myself.”

We walked side by side, peeking into the tidal pools. Vibrantly colored seaweed swayed in the transparent water. It really did look like an aquarium.

“Did you see something?”

“A tiny crab, I think. What about you?”

“Same here. But...”

“But?”

“Smelling the beach makes me hungry,” I said.

Hachijo-kun burst out laughing. “Same. Let’s go find something to eat later.”

“Okay.”

“Well then, should we go?”

I stood up, but just then—

“Huh?”

Slip!

I slipped on some damp moss underneath my feet.

“Waaah?!”

I was just about to fall right on my rear end, when Hachijo-kun caught me from behind. He slipped his hands underneath my arms and held me, my posture looking like an upright arrow symbol. I started panicking. Having him hold me in his arms made my heart race out of control.

“That scared me...” I said.

“No kidding. Maybe it was reckless making you come to the beach in those leather loafers,” he said with an exasperated laugh. He was right, of course. He pulled me a few steps away from the rocks so I could stand on a dry spot.

“Thanks for saving me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m the one who benefited anyway,” he said, scratching his cheek bashfully.

“Huh?”

“When I caught you, I...um...touched something soft.”

“What?!” It took me a few beats to realize what he meant. I quickly crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. “Pervert!”

“Well it wasn’t on purpose!”

“You didn’t have to say it, though! You perv!”

“I’m really sorry!” He put his hands in front of his face.

Well, it was my fault for slipping, so I couldn’t really blame him for an accident. Besides, I was only pretending to be mad to cover for myself. Honestly, I liked being hugged and touched by him.

“Fine, I forgive you.”

“Ha ha, thanks. I’m so lucky.” He gave me a dramatic bow. He was loving this. Did he actually feel bad or not?

I glared at him again until he averted his eyes.

“By the way, Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san said they were going to an aquarium. I wonder if they have creatures there like we saw on the shore.”

“Are you purposefully changing subjects?”

“Maybe.” He held out his hand for me. “Just don’t slip again.”

Now, should I take his hand to let this go, or should I shove him away and say it’ll take a lot more than that to trick me? I hesitated for a brief moment, but took his hand.

The two of us navigated the rocky shore together.

“Watch your step, Princess.”

“Heh heh.”

That was all it took to put me in a good mood. I guess I was easy to please.



Meanwhile, at Enoshima Aquarium...

“Look, Chi-chan! Raw shirasu is swimming around!”

“They’re sardine fries. Don’t call live animals food.”

Kanon and Chikaze looked through a round window at the sardine fry swimming around the tank. As expected for a famous aquarium in Shonan, which was known for sardines, there was a tank that displayed their growth process. They started out as fry, the size of a grain of rice, and gradually got

bigger until they were fully grown sardines.

“This one is about the size of a dried sardine,” Kanon said from the next tank over.

“Stop comparing it to food. That’s like saying *toro* is swimming when you see tuna,” Chikaze said with a sigh.

“No, no. *Toro* is a part. I’m talking about the appearance. It’s perfectly normal to see flatfish as boiled fish, or sole as *meunière*...”

“I don’t care. Really.” Chikaze sighed with exasperation. “Since when did you become such a glutton, Kanon?”

“Ahh, the best part about spending time alone is eating while walking around. It’s fun to introduce everyone to delicious restaurants that I’ve found.” Kanon smiled shyly. “It’s fun to eat alone when you think things like ‘Oh, Chi-chan would like this place,’ or ‘I bet Yuzu-chan would love the food here!’ I like to imagine how people will react when they eat the food,” Kanon said happily.

Chikaze let out a sigh. “Come to think of it...the restaurant you wanted to go to was pretty delicious.”

“Wasn’t it? I’m lucky to eat delicious food, and I feel happy introducing it to others. Doesn’t that make it feel like it’s twice as delicious with every bite?” Kanon said, smiling ear to ear.

“I guess you’ve found a good hobby then,” Chikaze said with an indifferent shrug.

Kanon made a fist and snorted. “I’m thinking about finding a good restaurant for Tsugumi-chan next time. Then the two of us will go and have some girl talk!”

“Is ‘girl talk’ really something you plan out like that? Also, since when did you start calling her by her name? Are you two close now?”

“I’m planning to be.”

“It sounds like you’re not making much progress, then.”

“Well, we hung out naked at the baths and ate lunch together, and she wasn’t being unkind. I think we can build a relationship.”

Chikaze knew that Kanon's bright personality was part of her charm, so she couldn't really be too pessimistic about it. Maybe her plan would actually come to fruition one day.

While discussing Kanon's schemes, the two looked around the hall and came to a cylindrical aquarium tank. There was a perfectly round fish inside called a lumpfish. Its eyes seemed aimless, and it stuck to the bottom of the tank.

"It's kinda cute, but it doesn't really have much expression," Chikaze said, and Kanon nodded.

"It looks like *hina-arare*. It doesn't seem like there are many edible parts."

"I'm not sure I'm willing to go along with that comparison."

"You can't tell what it's thinking. Reminds me of Yashiro-kun when he's spacing out in class."

"Aha ha ha. You're right." Chikaze laughed. Kanon stared at her. "What?"

"Hmm... Just wondering if something happened between you and Yashiro-kun. You two were together on the mountain trail that whole time, weren't you?"

"Nothing really happened."

"Really? I won't tell Tsugumi-chan... Oww!"

Chikaze flicked the smirking Kanon on her forehead.

"Idiot. I told you, nothing happened."

"Yeah, but the mood between you two seems different from before we split up."

"Yuzuki said that too..."

"See?!"

"I swear, nothing happened!" Chikaze said. Her expression softened as she looked at the lumpfish. "I just feel like I sorted through my feelings, thanks to our walk on the mountain trail."

"Hmm..." Kanon saw the content look on her face, and decided not to ask any more questions. She was always good at reading the room, and sensed that it

would be insensitive to pry any further, so she dropped the subject.

“We both had a pretty good field trip, huh?”

“Heh heh. Yep.” The two of them smiled at each other in front of the lumpfish’s tank.



We ended up crossing a long, meandering bridge to Enoshima Iwaya. We climbed stone stairs from the rocky place where we landed, followed signs guiding the way, and came out onto the paved Iwaya Bridge. It seemed to continue for over a hundred meters along the rocky slope.

Sagami Bay and the Pacific Ocean spread out to the right. The bare, rocky slope lay to the left. Waves crashed against rocks beneath the bridge. It was quite a sight.

“This scenery looks like the backdrop to the climax of some thriller.”

“Yeah, like where they’d chase the culprit to. It also looks something like *that*, doesn’t it?” Hachijo-kun replied.

“What do you mean, ‘that’?”

“Oh, well the first thing I thought of was the Otojima scene in Godzilla.”

“Otojima?”

“Yeah, it’s the first island he climbs up on, and his face pokes out from the shadow of a mountainside like this. He disappears from the other side of the mountain into the sea, but the background looked a lot like this. Mountains and ocean,” he explained with enthusiasm. Honestly, I had no idea what he was talking about. I’d probably seen that movie at some point, but I didn’t remember it in much detail. It reminded me of just how much he liked *kaiju*. He had been looking at figures of them in Jimbocho too.

I wonder if he’d come over to my house if I invited him to watch kaiju movies together.

We could watch them in my room, snuggled up together. It would be a totally different vibe than going to a movie theater. I wonder how it would be. Well, since it’s a kaiju movie, it’s not like there would be a romantic atmosphere... Ha

ha... But it seems fun. Oh, but if we were at my house, Tsubame would just butt in... Maybe we could go to Hachijo-kun's house? Wait, no way, no way! It's way too soon! I'm not emotionally ready for that yet!!!

"Nue...?"

"Hyaah?!" I was lost in thought, but all of a sudden Hachijo-kun leaned in close and called my name, causing me to let out a weird noise.

He chuckled. "'Hyaah,' huh? Heh heh. Where'd that voice even come from?"

"It's because you startled me!"

"I *did* call your name first. You were totally spacing out."

"Sorry."

"I know that you get deep in thought. It's not like this is something new," he said with a laugh. "So? What were you thinking about?"

"It's a secret..." There was no way I could tell him that I'd just been fantasizing about a date at my house. I pressed my hands against my blazing cheeks, and Hachijo-kun gave me a puzzled look.

"Well that just makes me even more curious."

"J-Just forget it, okay? Let's go, Hachijo-kun." I changed the subject, and this time I was the one who held out a hand.

He flashed me a grin. "Roger," he said, taking my hand.

After that, we headed towards the entrance of Iwaya, bought a ticket, and went inside. It was a cave entrance that just kept getting darker the farther in you went.

Outside, the sun was hot and the salty breeze felt like summer even in November. But the air inside the cave was chilly.

We continued down the narrow corridor and came out into a wide space. Water ran down the cave wall, illuminated by lights shining from below. That sight combined with the chilly, damp air made this space feel like it was cut off from the rest of the world.

"This is...amazing. I feel like we're in an Indiana Jones movie or something."

“It definitely feels like an adventure world.”

We stood side by side, admiring the view for a while.

“I heard that on moonlit nights, the stones on the wall shine.”

“I bet there’s an old grandpa who walks by and says, ‘Those stones sure are making a ruckus!’”

“Ha! Sounds like something out of an anime.”

As we kept following the cave wall, we met an anime grandpa—er, I mean a staff member—handing out candles in front of the first chamber of Enoshima Iwaya cave.

“Please take candles from here on out. The ceiling also gets lower, so please proceed carefully.”

We listened to the staff member’s explanation and each took a candle. We were greeted by darkness as we continued. The ceilings were low. We could hear water trickling down the walls. Did I mention it was dark?

“N-Now this really feels like we’re spelunking.” I could hear Hachijo-kun gulp.

There were lights on the ground here and there, but they provided little illumination. And because it wasn’t completely dark, the darkness seemed even deeper, like it would swallow you whole.

If not for the faint flicker of our candles, I wasn’t confident we could proceed without bumping into the ceilings or walls. With every step I took, I was more grateful that we’d been given them.

“I didn’t remember if I had been here before, but now I’m sure of it. There’s no way I came here. I definitely would’ve remembered this darkness.”

“Yeah, same.”

When we came here on that field trip, we must’ve turned back at the observatory. I bet it would have been a tough field trip to take little kids on, with the darkness and tight conditions of the cave, and the fact that you have to hold candles. There’s no way the school would’ve allowed that.

We continued down the dark path.

“Nue, are you following me?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Not only was the path narrow and dark, but it branched off. Getting separated from the group was another thing to worry about here. It felt like dusk, when the sun was just barely down and it was hard to see someone else’s face, and you’d have to say their name to make sure it was really them.

“This is hard on your back too,” Hachijo-kun muttered.

I didn’t have to bend over that much to make it through, but someone of Hachijo-kun’s above-average height would really have to hunch over. You even had to be really careful of people coming from the opposite direction.

The stone Buddhas set here and there along the ground gave the place an otherworldly feel.

“This is totally different from Benten Cave at Hasedera, huh?”

“Yeah... That definitely feels like a cave, but I feel like this one has a more natural feel to it. Like the dark is just going to overwhelm you.”

“If someone told me this was a tunnel to an alternate universe, I’d believe them.”

I definitely felt like I would be spirited away here.

I reached out my hand and grabbed the back of Hachijo-kun’s sweatshirt.

He turned to me. “Nue?”

I hesitantly asked, “Can I hold on to you?”

“Hm? Ah, sure.”

I actually wanted to hold hands, but we had to walk in a single file line, which was already difficult from holding a candle. So at the very least, I wanted to hold on to his clothes so I could know he was there.

As we continued walking, we came across a shrine guarded by the stone lion-dogs. There was a sign next to it that read “Birthplace of Enoshima Shrine.”

“This is our goal. It’s definitely a mood,” Hachijo-kun said, and I nodded.

It was so dark that we couldn't see the shrine clearly, making the stone lion-dogs even more menacing. It was a chilling atmosphere, and both of us reached for the other's hand.

We turned and walked back in silence, as if our words had been stolen from us.

When we arrived at the exit, we returned the candles to the staff member, and I reluctantly let go of Hachijo-kun's sweatshirt. Now I could finally breathe.

"That was intense."

"Yeah..."

That's all we could manage to say.

After that, we visited the second chamber of Iwaya. There was a dragon illuminated by bluish-purple lights, but it couldn't live up to the impression the first chamber had made on us.

Once we were done, we left Iwaya. Hachijo-kun stretched. "I feel like we saw something really great today."

"Yeah." I nodded.

He smiled at me. "Well, should we go get something to eat?"

"Yeah."

We held hands and started walking.

◇◇◇

"Wow... That was some incredible scenery, wasn't it, Yukito-kun?"

"It was."

Yuzuki and I were visiting the observation area at Enoshima. We walked through the gate to enter and passed through a rather chaotic garden with tons of plants, a Chinese-style gazebo, and all kinds of strange monuments. When we arrived at the observatory, we took the elevator to the top and saw a vast view of the ocean, the sky, the Enoden line, and the city around it.

Yuzuki gazed at the scenery for a while, then turned to look at me. "This view is so amazing because of how high up we are, but we didn't really have to work

for it. We even took an escalator on the way here,” she said, referring to the Enoshima escalator. “Are you sure you wouldn’t have preferred to walk instead? I’m not sure I would’ve had the stamina to make it, though...” She gave me an apologetic look.

“Hm? Nah, not really,” I said casually, not wanting her to feel bad. “Maybe if I came here alone I’d just walk, but since we came together, I want you to save your energy. After all, I get to spend time with my friend. I wouldn’t want her to be exhausted.”

“Ha ha. I guess you’re right.” She smiled. Just the fact that I got to see her energetic smile made me feel like I’d made the right decision going on the escalator instead. *The only reason I did was because of his advice, though...*

“If you’re taking Sato-san to the observatory, you should probably use the escalator.”

“Escalator?”

“Yeah, you can pay a fee to get an easy ride up there,” Yashiro had suggested.

“Isn’t there a rumor that says couples who go to Enoshima together break up? I’ve heard rumors about people breaking up after they go to a certain theme park where dreams come true—supposedly it’s because the relationship can’t stand the long wait times for the attractions. Similarly, the reason behind all those rumors about Enoshima is because there are so many steep hills to walk up.”

“Ahh, now that you mention it, we did have to walk a really long time to get to that observatory...”

I had come here a long time ago with my parents, and I remembered having to walk up and down steep hills to get to the observatory. It was no trouble for me, but it had left my mom panting, and my grandparents had to stay back at Nakamise-dori.

“It might not be very far for you, me, or Ido-san, and you might think it’s a waste of money, but it would be worth it for Torano-san and Sato-san.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Kanon probably wouldn’t like it either,” I said.

Yashiro smirked. "If you decide to walk with Sato-san, make sure to slow down and stay at her pace."

"Ha ha. Guys who have girlfriends sure are different, huh?" I bet Yashiro was making an effort to stay at Torano-san's pace, so they could walk together for a long time. "Okay. I'll take your advice. Thanks, man."

Thanks to that conversation, we used the escalator. If I hadn't received that advice, I probably would've thought paying for the escalator was too much of a pain. And since Yuzuki was such a hard worker, she would've tried to keep up with my pace, forced herself to walk too quickly up the hills, and become exhausted by this point.

If we'd gone that route, it wouldn't have made for a very good memory.

Thanks, Yashiro. I uttered a silent word of gratitude to him, wherever on this island he was.

Yuzuki propped her elbows up on the railing and turned to look at me. "This view is so beautiful, but I bet it's gorgeous at night too."

"I bet. There are decorative lights strung on the path all the way up here, so the island and observatory are probably lit up really pretty at night."

"It's a shame that we have to leave before sunset," she said with disappointment.

I rested my hand on top of her head. "We can come back again sometime. Enoshima's an easy trip."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's come back again with everyone," she said with a bright smile.

With everyone, huh? I wondered if she was trying to be careful of my feelings by saying that.

I liked being loud and having fun with everyone. Yuzuki knew that too. She understood how much I valued my group of friends, and never tried to take me away from them. She was the girl who encouraged me to approach someone who looked sad.

Spending this day with her made me realize that. I was grateful, but I wondered how she felt. Had I let her do the things she wanted to do as well?

“If you decide to walk with Sato-san, make sure to slow down and stay at her pace.”

What Yashiro had said was right. It wasn't good to have her always come to me. I needed to compromise and be the one to go to her, so that we could both walk at a good pace together.

“It would be fun to come back here again together, but everyone's schedules don't always line up.”

“What?”

Yuzuki stared at me and I smiled at her. “And if that's the case, I'll just take you. We can come back here, just the two of us.”

At first she looked stunned, but once my words sank in, her eyes opened wide. She turned bright red and pressed her hands against her cheeks, nodding over and over again. “Yes. Yes! Let's come back together!”

“Yeah, let's do it. Should we pinky promise?” I joked, but Yuzuki insisted.

“Yes, let's do it!”

So even though we were high schoolers, we stood there and linked pinkies.

“It's a promise, okay? Don't you dare break it!” she said with a smile as she hooked our hands together.

Once I saw that smile on her face, I was confident that I could never break a promise to her.



After Nue and I left Iwaya, we went back down to the rocky hill we had been at before. If we went down the stairs here, we'd be back at the dock where the *Benten Maru* was waiting. There were several restaurants upstairs. There was a barrel of water in front of one, where you could see them grilling clams. It was the very picture of a seafood lover's paradise.

We were starving, so we started discussing what to eat. “How about this

place, Nue?”

“Okay.”

Since it was four o’clock in the afternoon, the place we chose was pretty empty. We decided to make the most of it and sit outside on the terrace, which had a 180-degree ocean view. Beyond the railing was a rocky cliff.

“We’re high up enough that you’d definitely die if you jumped from here.”

“Jump?”

“I wouldn’t do it no matter how much you dared me to.”

“I’d never do that.”

There was a relaxing atmosphere as we talked together. The view of the sea below was getting gradually darker, reminding me that this was autumn after all. The strong rays of sunlight and the salty sea breeze had been messing with my sense of what season it was.

“Welcome!” A waitress greeted us as she brought over some wet washcloths and a menu.

“What should we get?”

“I want to eat clams.”

“I’ll have that too,” I said.

We didn’t want to eat anything too heavy, so we ordered clams and drinks.

Nue stared at the ocean while we waited for our food to arrive, as if she could gaze at it forever and never get sick of it.

“Someday...”

“Hm?”

“Someday I want to live in a place where I can see the ocean from my house. I love watching how the scenery around the ocean changes according to the seasons. So someday...” she murmured.

A place where you can see the ocean...

“We’d have to move, then. Although Mt. Fuji is just barely visible from our

town, we can't see the ocean. We do have a big river, though."

"Ha ha. Yeah."

"Which do you like best? The Pacific, or the Sea of Japan? Or what about the Sea of Okhotsk?"

"No one's ever asked me that question in my life. I want a calm ocean."

"Hmm...in that case, maybe the Seto Inland Sea would be best."

"I've always wanted to go there."

"Moving's tough, though. We'd have to save up a lot of money."

"Yeah. You're right."

"Hey, Nue. I just realized something."

"Hm? What?"

"We've been talking about this as if we are gonna be living together."

"Huh?" When she finally realized what I meant, her whole face turned red.

Of course, I'd been talking about us moving in together and living in the same house as if it were the most natural thing too. I just wanted to have a place in her future, and Nue didn't seem to feel uncomfortable about me talking like that either.

We'd buy a house, move in, and live together. It just seemed natural.

"What should we do? Should we move in together after we graduate? Ah, I guess we should probably stay at home for a while until we save up enough money... What do you think?" I teased.

"Honestly!" She blushed an even deeper shade of red and kicked my shin under the table. She must've been pretty embarrassed, because she put more strength into it than usual. But she didn't deny it, so she must not have been too upset.

"Here you go!" The waitress brought us our grilled clams. Come to think of it, wasn't there some old game where you'd try to find matching clam shells? I seemed to remember a superstition that if you found a matching clam shell, you'd find your soulmate.

I wondered if I would end up marrying the girl in front of me and we'd build a happy home together. I'm sure she'd freak out even more if she knew I was thinking about that when we were only in the first year of high school, though.

"Hm? What's up, Hachijo-kun?" she asked in a puzzled tone as I stared intently at the clams.

I shook my head. "It's nothing."

"Okay...?"

Someday... That day might come.

◇◇◇

After a relaxing meal, Hachijo-kun and I returned to the *Benten Maru* before it got too dark outside. It was already night by the time we reached the Katase-Enoshima Station, though. Since we'd already taken roll call earlier, there was no need to meet up with the rest of the group. All we had to do now was go home.

"Should we take the first car on the train if we're going to switch trains at Shinjuku?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Enoshima switches back at Fujisawa. So after Fujisawa, the first car will be the last one."

"I bet that'd be a good gimmick to use in a horror story or a mystery novel."

"Huh?"

"I hurriedly passed through the ticket gate and rushed into the last car. The door was about to close. Tired from running, I took a seat and fell asleep after a while. But when I woke up, for some reason I was in the first car? How was that possible when I'd gone to sleep in the last car?"

"Answer: 'Because I got on at Katase-Enoshima Station.'"

"Bingo."

"That's kind of obvious and has a weak punch line. The same thing happens when you turn around and drive."

"Oof. You're surprisingly spicy today."

We chatted about all kinds of dumb things as we sat next to each other on the last car with some other students from Ikanyama High.

Hachijo-kun let out a yawn. "How long does it take to get to Shinjuku again?"

"An hour on the express train."

"There's no way I'd be able to wake up."

"You can go ahead and sleep." I was a little tired, but he'd hiked up a mountain. It was no wonder we were like this after walking around the whole day. I gently rested my head against his shoulder. "I think I'll fall asleep too."

"Yeah?" He rested his weight against me and closed his eyes. The two of us sat snuggled there like that. I wondered if one of our teachers would get mad if they were on the train and saw us like that. Just then...

"I feel like this happened before..." Hachijo-kun murmured with his eyes still closed.

"What do you mean?"

"I feel like I've felt your warmth like this before."

I didn't answer. He was talking about that day behind the school, when I'd snuggled up against him while he slept and kissed the corner of his mouth. It was a secret moment between us, one that even he didn't know about.

"Zzzz..." I heard his deep, even breaths and knew he'd fallen asleep. Just like that day.

That reminds me... I never did get to finish what I started at the school festival.

I'd been hoping for another opportunity, but we had been apart for a lot of the day, and when we were together it was all at tourist spots, so there was no chance for it to happen. I looked at his sleeping face. *Might as well do it while he's sleeping, just like last time.*

I somehow pushed away that temptation. This time, I wanted to do it while he was awake.

"Zzz..."

I can just take my time. There was no need to rush. We had plenty of time

together. Besides... *Someday we're going to live together...*

"The door is closing. Please watch your step."

Fsssh. Ka-tonk, ka-tonk, ka-tonk.

The train began to move.

I smiled, leaned back against Hachijo-kun again, and closed my eyes.

Final Chapter: After

A few days had passed since our field trip to Kamakura, and it was lunchtime. Nue and I were sitting at the library circulation desk as usual, spending a relaxing time together. But something was different...

“Torano-san, can you let me borrow Yashiro one day this weekend?”

“Ooh, let’s hang out together that day, Tsugumi-chan!”

Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san had started visiting the library regularly. Up until now, they’d seemed hesitant about approaching us when we were alone because of the wall we’d built up, but the field trip had broken it down and brought us closer together.

Ido-san turned towards Nue and pressed her hands together. “Please! I really want to go try this gelato place I found at a farm upriver on the bike path. There are some rough spots in the road, so I want to go with someone else, just in case I get a flat tire or something. No one else can go. Yukito and Yuzuki are going somewhere together, so pleeeaaase let me borrow Yashiro for a day. Please?”

“I’m not sure...” Nue trailed off, looking troubled. She glanced at me, unsure of what to say. I couldn’t blame her.

“Why do you need Torano-san’s permission in the first place?” I asked Ido-san.

“Because she’s your girlfriend!” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “I figured that if I got her permission first, you’d be more likely to agree to it! Plus, I want to have a good relationship with Torano-san too.”

“Don’t you think you should show me a bit more respect?”

“Please, Torano-san? I promise I’ll owe you one. I’ll even write a receipt for checking him out.”

“What am I, a library book?”

“All right. You can have him on Saturday.”

“Nue, don’t just check me out without my permission!”

Nue handed Ido-san a blank library checkout form, which Ido-san merrily signed.

Why were my weekend plans being decided for me? I didn’t have anything else to do, but still!

Hanamizawa-san leaned over the desk, looking puzzled as to why I’d called Nue by her nickname. “So can we hang out on Saturday then, Nue? There’s somewhere I wanna take you too!”

“Well, I...”

“Do you have other plans on Saturday?”

“No...” Nue gave me an uncomfortable look.

I smiled back at her. “Go ahead. I want you to have fun.”

She gave me a look pleading for help, but I wasn’t going to. Hanamizawa-san and Ido-san both stood triumphant, having fulfilled their goals.

“All right, Yashiro. Meet me on Saturday,” Ido-san said.

“You too, Tsugumi-chan! I’ll text you with the details.”

And with that, the two of them left the library. Nue and I exchanged looks. Well, hers was more of a glare.

“You sold me out, Hachijo-kun.”

“As if you’re one to talk! You *lent* me out!”

“Well yeah, but... You’re my boyfriend!”

“And you’re my girlfriend.”

We glared at each other, but it didn’t last long. We both burst out laughing.

“Things around us sure have changed, huh?”

“I know. It’s like our world has gotten bigger.”

Before, Hadori-kun had told me that I was a good influence on Hanamizawa-

san and Ido-san, but it went both ways. People had effects on each other, and it wasn't a one-way street. I wondered how they felt about the effect I had on them.

I used to think I'd be fine as long as I had Nue. But my world had expanded. And I didn't think it was a bad thing.

Still, my first priority won't change. I rifled around in my pocket. "Will you come with me, Nue?"

"Hm?" She gave me a puzzled look as I led her over to one of the tables next to the window, where the afternoon sun shone through. Once we sat down next to each other, I took the item out of my pocket. It was the comb I had bought at that souvenir shop in Hase.

"I'm going to touch your hair, okay?"

I swept back her glossy black hair and slid the comb through it. The smooth sound of it combing through the strands of her hair was relaxing in the warm sun.

"Why are you combing my hair?"

"I found this comb in Hase with these cherry blossoms carved into it. And I thought it would be nice to comb your hair with it. It's a present for you," I said as I combed through her hair.

She shook her head. "I don't want it."

"What...?" I froze, shocked that she turned it down. "I have no use for it, though. I really wish you'd accept it."

She hastily shook her head. "No, that's not what I mean. I want you to keep the comb."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to comb my hair." She glanced over at me. "I'd really *love* it if my boyfriend combed my hair. It feels special, don't you think?"

"Why are you emphasizing the word 'love'?"

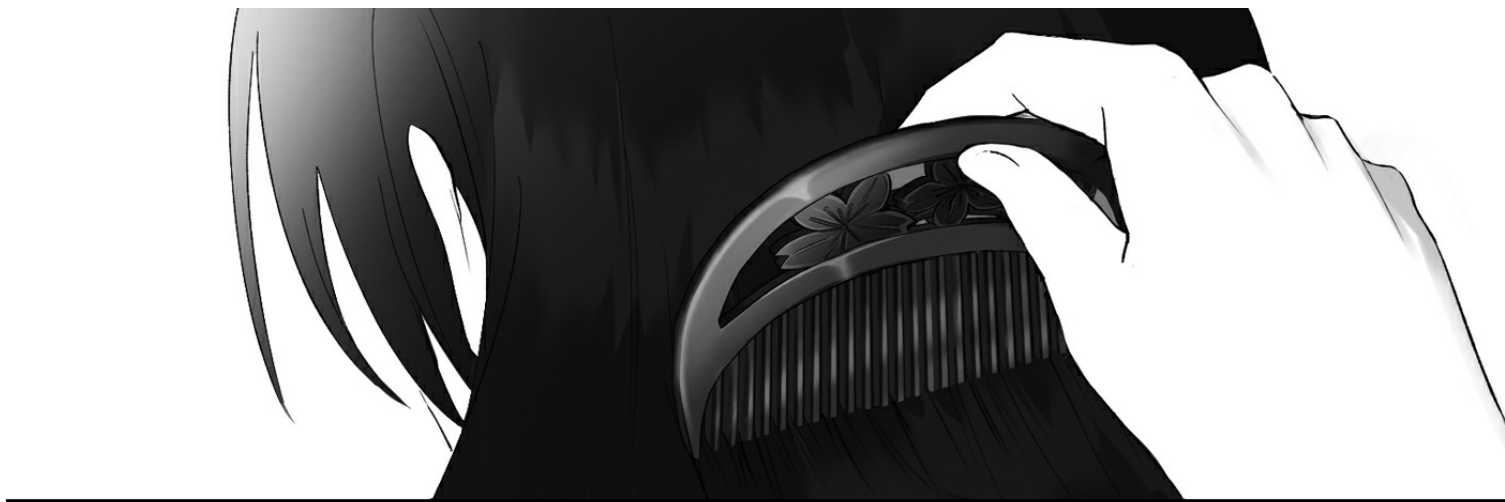
"Hee hee. Anyway, would you really be satisfied with only doing this once?"

she asked. I could only laugh at how perceptive she was. “Go ahead and comb my hair as much as you want, if you *love* it that much.”

“Again, what’s with the emphasis?”

“Ha ha ha. You know why.”

We smiled together.





The following Sunday, I wore the outfit Hanamizawa-san and I had picked out together the day before—the place she wanted to take me was a clothing boutique—and nervously went to ring the doorbell.

But then I paused.

That was because I was now staring at the nameplate by a door that read “Yashiro.” That’s right, I was at Hachijo-kun’s house, because he had invited me over today.

I tried to calm my racing heartbeat and get my breathing back to normal.

“Jeez, what are you doing, sis? Come on already!”

“Ahh!”

Tsubame reached out and rang the doorbell before I could react.

Ding dong!

“Coming!” a voice from inside called out right away, and the door swung open.

“Welcome, Nue. Oh, is this Tsubame-chan?”

“Hello! I’m her younger sister, Tsubame!”

“Hi, Hachijo-kun.”

“Hi. Come on in,” Hachijo-kun said with a smile.

“Thanks!” Tsubame replied energetically. Even though this was her first time here, she didn’t hesitate to barge right in. Sometimes I wondered if we were really related. I was jealous of how bold and fearless she could be sometimes.

“Sorry that Tsubame had to come over too. Here.” I handed him a box of cakes I’d bought on the way here.

He flashed me a grin and took it. “It’s fine! My parents and sister aren’t coming back until late tonight. It would’ve been nerve-racking to be here all alone.”

“You have a sister?” Tsubame asked.

“Yep, she’s in college. You guys have an older sibling too, right?”

“Yeah, we have an older brother who lives in the dorms. I’m the middle child,” I said.

While we chatted, Tsubame tugged at me, yelling, “Come on!”

The reason I brought my sister along to my first time visiting my boyfriend’s house was...

“We’re gonna watch Godzilla, right? Hurry up!”

“Calm down! Jeez...”

That’s right. We were going to watch the 1954 Godzilla film. It had been on my mind ever since Hachijo-kun mentioned it in Enoshima, and I’d told him I wanted to see it. He said, “Oh, we have the DVD at my house. Wanna come watch?”

Honestly, I was less interested in the movie and more interested in going to his house. I was so excited, I accidentally let it slip to Tsubame last night. “I’m going to watch Godzilla tomorrow,” I’d said.

Tsubame goes nuts for superhero and *kaiju* movies, so she said, “I wanna come too!” I tried to tell her I was going to see it at a friend’s house, but she wouldn’t give up. So I texted Hachijo-kun and asked if it was okay to bring her along. He replied with a sticker of a smug face, and said it was fine.

And so that’s why I had brought her today.

Speaking of Tsubame, she was currently waltzing around the living room with a smirk. “So the friend was a *guy*. Is he your booooooyfriend?”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll make you go home.”

“Ooh, you’re scary, sis! Hey, can I call you Hachi-nii?”

“Hachi-nii...?”

“You’re the Hachijo-kun sis is always talking about, right? And since you’re going to get married someday and become my older brother, might as well start calling you Hachi-nii now.”

“Tsubame!!!” I raised my voice, which was unusual for me. Tsubame’s face

tightened. Honestly, this girl...

Luckily, Hachijo-kun just laughed it off. “Ha ha ha. Is she really your sister?”

Since Tsubame was here, we all sat down to watch TV in the living room instead of the bedroom. Hachijo-kun must’ve had everything ready to go, because he immediately started the movie.

“Whoa, it’s in black and white!” Tsubame exclaimed with surprise.

“You said you wanted to see it, but you didn’t know that?”

“I’ve only seen the Millennium series!”

“I don’t know much about those.”

“Just a generation gap problem, I guess,” Hachijo-kun said. We were only three years apart, but whatever...

We ate the cake I brought and watched the 1954 version of Godzilla. Watching it now, I could really see the horror elements. The scene where he peeks his head out from behind the mountain looked like something out of a murder movie. *Oh, this is the scene with the cliffs Hachijo-kun was talking about. Yeah, it does look like that place in front of Iwaya.*

Then Godzilla made landfall on Tokyo. The first time instilled fear in the people, and the second time he treated human civilization as hostile and did everything in his power to destroy it. Even in black and white, Tsubame was staring intently at the sight of the merciless slaughter.

And then, after Godzilla left Tokyo as a burnt field, there was the conflict between young genius scientists in love about whether or not to use the forbidden weapon against Godzilla...

Nue.

Suddenly, I heard Hachijo-kun whispering in my ear. From sitting in the middle, he pointed at Tsubame. I glanced over to find that she had fallen asleep as soon as the main action scene had ended.

“Zzz...” She dozed with her mouth half-open. I guess a romance between two adults was boring for a junior high schooler.

What should we do? Wake her up?

No, let her sleep. She'll probably just fall asleep again if you wake her up.

Ha ha. Got it.

Ah!

Our eyes widened once we realized our faces were right next to each other as we whispered. We were close enough to feel each other's breaths. And then...

I finally finished what I'd started before the school festival.

It wasn't a long kiss, but my cheeks flushed when I felt his warmth lingering on my lips. And the first thing I thought was...

What was that?

We said it at the same time.

In Kamakura, there should have been a lot of romantic moments and time spent alone to do this, but there hadn't been. I couldn't believe we'd done it when my little sister was sleeping in the same room, with zero romantic atmosphere.

But I guess that kind of suited us. We were both embarrassed and happy, and we laughed out loud. I hoped we could have many days like this together in the future.

"Huh? What? Was there a funny scene?!" The noise woke Tsubame, who looked around in a panic.

It was so funny, we burst into laughter again.

Afterword

Hello, it's Dojyomaru. I completed the subject matters I wanted to cover in the previous volume, so I just wrote whatever I pleased in this volume.

If I continued hiding Nue like before, it would only be a rehash of the previous volume. So from this volume onward, I set her up as a character who can have one-on-one situations. She still hides behind Yashiro when they're with a large crowd, but that's just part of her personality.

And since I wanted to write freely, this time I tried to divide the story into five parts, from the perspective of different characters. This is often seen as a forbidden move, and it is also a style of writing that tends to be criticized.

For example, if the exact same scene is depicted twice, from the perspective of the main character and from the perspective of a supporting character, the lines and content would be almost the same, and people will say it's just rehashing the story or filler. It's fine if it's used sparingly, but it will feel repetitive if you do it too much.

So, in chapters 4A to E, it starts off the same with the group parting in front of Engaku-ji set to rendezvous later at Hase temple. However, the characters go off separately and the timelines are staggered. There are common lines in the scene where they meet up again, but I tried to use them as little as possible.

As a result, laying out the story this way makes it easy to understand why the character did or said something in a part with a different point of view. This is a technique that can be seen in adventure games and the like. If last time was a mystery, this time it's an adventure. To give you a little hint, read and compare Nue's POV and Kanon's POV. Did you notice Nue-chan's mischief?

Also, there were some new characters that appeared this time.

One of them was a character named Tatsuaki Iikanji, whose family home is a temple. Actually, he's also a character in *The Student I Married Was a Clumsy and Cute Nomadic Princess* (or *Nomadic Princess* for short). Although he is not

the main character, he has an important role in the story, and you can read more about his activities there.

Yashiro and his friends go to Ikanyama High School, which is also the setting of *Nomadic Princess*, but it takes place while Yashiro and friends are in their second year of high school. *Yashiro-kun* is a coming-of-age ensemble drama, and *Nomadic Princess* is a relatively ordinary romantic comedy, but I've structured it so that I can freely borrow characters. After all, Souma from his high school days (*Realist Hero*) is also there, and appeared a little bit in this volume as well. If I'm able to make another sequel to this volume, I could even use characters from that series. However, *Yashiro-kun* has a much higher "calorie count" in writing than *Realist* and the sales weren't very good, so that might be tough...

And last but not least, on my Pixiv page, I will post short stories that were not included in either this or the previous volume. And with the permission of Overlap-sama and Kou Kusaka-sama, I can include unreleased illustrations drawn by Kou-sama. I really hope you come take a look.

Thank you to everyone involved in this work.

-Dojyomaru



Yashiro-kun's
★ ★ Guide to
Going Solo:
After Story ★
*Yashiro-kun no
Ohitori
sama
kouza* ★

Author: Dojyomaru

Illustrator: Kou Kusaka





"Open up..."

"How
does it
taste?"

"I think it's
too sweet
for me."

Bonus Short Stories

Tsugumi & Kanon

KANON: Tsugumi-chan! (°▽°)o≡♪ Tsugumi-chan! (°▽°)o≡♪

(half a day later)

KANON: Hey, don't just leave me on read! (´;ω;`)

TSUGUMI: ...I'm not really comfortable with this kind of conversation.

KANON: Sorry, sorry. I wanna talk to you about Saturday.

TSUGUMI: You said we were going out together somewhere...
Where are we going?

KANON: Heh heh. Where do you think?

(Five minutes later)

KANON: I'm really sorry for getting carried away. So can you please stop leaving me on read??

KANON: I wanna go look at clothes together.

TSUGUMI: Clothes?

KANON: Chi-chan, Yuzu-chan, and I always go clothes shopping and pick out outfits for each other. I figured you didn't have anyone to do that sort of thing with, so we should go together!

TSUGUMI: Are you insulting my outfits?

KANON: Well, how do you normally get your clothes?

TSUGUMI: ...My mom picks them out from the bargain bin.

KANON: Thought so.

KANON: You're a girl, Tsugumi-chan! You gotta pick out your own clothes!

TSUGUMI: Clothes are really low on my priority list.

TSUGUMI: I like to use my spare money buying ebooks. And...for when Yashiro-kun and I go on dates.

KANON: Yeah, but don't you wanna look pretty on your dates?

KANON: He freaked out when you wore that cheongsam!

TSUGUMI: Well yeah, but...

KANON: Just leave it to me! I'll choose a super cute outfit that's gonna have Yashiro-kun's eyes bugging out of his head!

TSUGUMI: Um...

KANON: Isn't that what you want?

TSUGUMI: ...Well, yeah, but...

KANON: Good, thanks for being honest with me. Listen, you've got a lot to work with, so we need to keep it simple. Keep it casual, yet feminine. I think we should hit Ikebukuro. I don't think it'll cost that much.

TSUGUMI: I don't really get it. But as long as it's cheap, I guess that's fine.

KANON: Leave it to me. (๑•ૢ•)و✧

KANON: I'll take care of everything! You're gonna make Yashiro-kun's heart race!

TSUGUMI: ...Okay. I'm counting on you.

KANON: He'll be so head over heels, you'll finally get your first kiss!

(Five minutes later)

KANON: Huh? Wasn't that a weird time to leave me on read?

TSUGUMI: ...I didn't know how to respond.

KANON: (・ω・,,`)?

KANON: ...Are you sure you're not hiding something?

TSUGUMI: See you on Saturday.

KANON: Hey! You're avoiding the question!

KANON: Now you're not even reading my messages! I'm gonna get the whole story out of you on Saturday!

Tsugumi & Tsubame

TSUBAME: where r u

TSUGUMI: (・ω・,,`)?

TSUGUMI: Coming home on the Odakyu Line. Why?

TSUBAME: mom says we're out of ponzu and she wants u to buy some

TSUBAME: (*´~`人)plz

TSUGUMI: Okay. Is that all we need?

TSUBAME: buy smthg for ur cute sister too

TSUGUMI: I told you, I'm already on the Odakyu Line.

TSUGUMI: I'll get you a roasted sweet potato though.

TSUBAME: i love uuuuu

TSUBAME: (,,>ω<,,)luv≡(,,>ω<,,)luv≡(,,>ω<,,);luv≡

TSUGUMI: You're so ridiculous.

TSUBAME: so did u have fun in kamakura

TSUGUMI: Yes.

TSUBAME: and and? how was ur date with ur bf?? or r u

sleeping next to him right now??

TSUGUMI: (^▽^;)Oops

TSUBAME: ...what?? for real???

TSUGUMI: Not exactly, but close... I can't say anything besides that right now.

TSUBAME: i thought u said u were on the odakyu line?? r u taking a break before round 2

TSUGUMI: Where did you learn that?? No, he's just sleeping in the seat next to me.

TSUBAME: whaat? booring.

TSUBAME: still, that's not bad. do you have ur head on his shoulder??

TSUGUMI: ...Yeah.

TSUGUMI: (" /д/)hehe

TSUBAME: im so jealous of u

TSUBAME: so when r u gonna introduce me to hachijo-kun

TSUGUMI: What? How did you know his name??

TSUBAME: u talk about him all the time when u talk about school stuff

TSUBAME: so so so? when's he coming over? think ur gonna marry him?

TSUGUMI: Tsubame!!

TSUBAME: ur scaaary

TSUGUMI: ㇿ(° ㊦ ° ㇿ)

TSUBAME:ahaha. well i don't wanna interrupt

TSUBAME: have fun with...u know

TSUGUMI: Stop talking like that, honestly.

TSUGUMI: You're gonna get it once I get home.

TSUBAME: (◦>◻<◦)eeeeek

Tsugumi & Yuzuki

YUZUKI: Um, Torano-san? There's something I'd like to ask you.

TSUGUMI: What is it?

YUZUKI: Are you the kind of person who just goes along with whatever Yashiro-kun wants?

YUZUKI: Or does he go along with what you want?

TSUGUMI: (・ω・,,`)?

TSUGUMI: Why do you ask?

YUZUKI: Sorry, it's just when we went to Kamakura, it felt like Yukito-kun was trying to go along with what I wanted, so I was wondering if I should do the same for him next time...

YUZUKI: Since Yashiro-kun is more athletic than you, I wondered how you deal with it. Because...even though you have your differences, you're still in perfect sync. I think your relationship is a lot like my ideal.

TSUGUMI: ...Hearing that makes me feel shy.

YUZUKI: Ooh, I'd like to see that. Can we video chat?

TSUGUMI: Absolutely not.

YUZUKI: Ha ha ha. I thought you'd say that.

YUZUKI: So? Going back to my question...

TSUGUMI: I don't like to exercise, and we walk at different paces, so he probably tries to go with what I want.

YUZUKI: I figured that. But one person can't always cater to the other person's needs...

TSUGUMI: Yeah but there's no sense in worrying about it.

YUZUKI: What?(°Д°≡°Д°)For real?

TSUGUMI: You're different people, so of course you're not going to be the same. One of you will always have to change your pace a little to match the other's. But if you overthink it and feel like you have to take turns, you'll get exhausted.

YUZUKI: So then what should I do?

TSUGUMI: If he's always the one catering to you, he won't be uncomfortable as long as you're grateful for it. Just tell him thank you.

YUZUKI: (; ·`Д·´) Whoa, that's so deep.

YUZUKI: Is that what you do, Torano-san?

TSUGUMI: ...Yes. When I tell Yashiro-kun thank you, he always gives me a soft smile. And since I like seeing him smile, I end up asking him to do me even more favors.

YUZUKI: Hm? Are you gushing right now?

TSUGUMI: From what I can tell, Hadori-kun seems to be the type of person who is happy and excited when people rely on him. So if you're happy and say thank you, I wouldn't think it's unfair to always let him do things for you. Still, if you think words aren't enough, you should show it with actions.

YUZUKI: Actions...?

TSUGUMI: You could give him a present, or cuddle with him. Just show him gratitude in a way that satisfies you. And if you're really worried about it, think about how to show him gratitude instead of how much trouble you're

causing him.

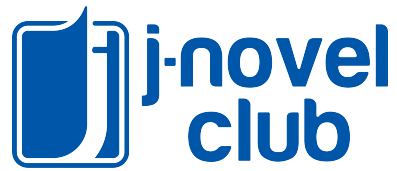
YUZUKI: (; ·`д·´) Ohhh...

YUZUKI: How do you show your gratitude?

TSUGUMI:

TSUGUMI: Sometimes...I give him a big hug.

YUZUKI: SQUEE! (*> ■ <*)ツ



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